

U.F.O.の夏 イリヤの空

その1



秋山瑞人

ILLUSTRATION ● 胸都えーじ

 電撃文庫

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Iriya no Sora, UFO no Natsu - Volume 01

Chapter 01-02 Part 13

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1-1

Chapter 1: Close Encounter of the Third Kind

1-1

Somebody had said that it felt amazing, so he'd decided that he would try it for himself. "I'll sneak into the school pool for a swim on the way back from the mountain retreat," Asaba Naoyuki thought.

It was the final day of his middle school second year summer vacation¹, and it was about 5 past 8 P.M. He parked his bike at the nearby video shop, slung his stuffed duffel bag over his shoulder, and walked back to school along a poorly lit street. He jumped the side gate on the north side, and passed quickly behind the building where the clubrooms were.

Feeling like a spy that had snuck behind enemy lines, he peeked out from the shadows of the incinerator. The only redeeming quality of a school in the countryside was the size of its schoolyard. Having been trampled on throughout the summer, the soft white lines that some lousy club member had drawn resembled the Nazca Lines to eyes that were not yet completely used to the dark.

To his right was the worn down gymnasium. Straight ahead was Sonohara City Middle School's wooden main building, so worn down that it even had its own distinct atmosphere about it. To his left was the school's newest addition, the Sonohara District 4th Shelter.

It was dark, and naturally nobody was around. Distant sounds carried through surprisingly sharply: the ring of an endlessly ringing telephone, the siren of a patrol car chasing something down, the running engine of a distant moped, someone being thanked by a vending machine for buying juice. Suddenly, the red character for "Buddha"² appeared on a big circle looming in the night sky. It was the billboard for a Buddhist altar shop that was recently built on the outskirts of town. It would have broken the mood, so he pretended not to see it.

The clock tower in the center of the school building indicated that it was 8:14

P.M., but this was no ordinary 8:14 P.M. It was 8:14 P.M. on the final day of his middle school second year summer vacation.

To Asaba, who at this point hadn't touched his homework at all, that school building with the clock tower separating the school grounds and sinking into the summer night sky was a veritable three-story wooden time bomb. That clock tower was despicable. He felt like time throughout the world would stop at 8:14 if he cut the life out of that clock's cogs. If that happened, then summer vacation wouldn't end, and second semester wouldn't begin.

For a month and a half now, despite the fact that the only people who looked up at that clock dial were the buzz cut members from the sports clubs, the fact that nobody would notice if it took a little break, and the fact that it didn't even have a second hand, that clock tower continued to shave off time, one second at a time, for the eternity that was about a month and a half.

And now, Asaba was left with barely 13 hours. In about 13 hours, *boom*. Second semester would begin without mercy. The science and homeroom teacher of class 2-4, Kawaguchi Taizou, 35 years old and single, would probably line up those who couldn't turn in their homework on the platform, glare at them with scientific eyes, and while scientifically striking their heads with the attendance record, demand a scientific explanation for why their homework isn't turned in³.

"But Sensei, I couldn't help it. I was abducted by aliens on the first day of summer vacation and taken to these pyramids on the other side of the moon. These pyramids were their secret bases for invading Earth, and the prison I was thrown into had seven other boys and girls from countries around the world, who were abducted just like me. We escaped from the prison, stole their ray guns and went on a rampage, somehow destroyed the pyramids and escaped in a UFO, and were finally able to return to Earth just last night. There wasn't any time to do homework. But, thanks to us, humanity was saved from complete destruction, and with that, you and I were able to be here today, Sensei. No, that's not it. Like I said, this isn't sunburn; it's radiation exposure caused by the UFO's anti-gravity field. Here, please take a good look. Doesn't it look like the Lucky Dragon No. 5⁴?"

“I’ll definitely get torn apart.”

That being said, the result probably wouldn’t be much different if he spoke honestly and said, “I was holed up in the mountains behind Sonohara Base with Suizenji-san, the President of the Newspaper Club, searching for UFOs the entire summer.” That reality was hiding with Asaba in the shadows of the incinerator, and in about 13 hours, it would be established as plain historic fact.

Asaba Naoyuki’s middle school second year summer vacation was swallowed up by the mountains behind Sonohara Base and vanished.

13 hours left.

Even a death row inmate has the privilege to a final smoke. That’s why it would be okay for him to sneak into the school pool for a swim tonight. It was only natural.

Somewhere immediately nearby, an unseen cicada gave off a quick chirp in the dark. Asaba confirmed for the final time that nobody was around. Only the three-story wooden building was glaring at Asaba with all of its windows open, as if saying, “I see through all of your wicked acts.”

Asaba was aware that the faculty room was to the left of the center of the school building, and that to the left of that was the so-called “nap room.” It was a small tatami-matted room, whose use remained unknown. If the night watch Sensei was around, then he’d probably be in there.

However, there were no lights leaking from any of the school building windows, and Asaba didn’t even know for sure whether his school had posted a night watch Sensei in the first place.

His destination was to the side of the gymnasium, about 30 meters from the incinerator where Asaba was hiding. The pool wasn’t surrounded by a fence, but by a wall of tall interconnected plastic panels. It was like the infamous Berlin Wall; an impregnable, unshakeable wall that completely absorbed the male students’ cries of resentment, “we can’t watch the girls’ swimming classes with this!”

But right now, to Asaba, that wall was an ally. Thanks to that wall, there was no possibility of him being seen while swimming in the pool at night.

The point of entry had been taken care of. Asaba was well aware that the door to the locker room was completely loose, and even if it was locked, all he had to do was forcefully turn the knob and the lock would give.

All he needed was courage.

“There shouldn’t be anyone here. There’s no way I’ll get caught.”

But he couldn’t wipe away a lingering doubt. If by any chance anyone saw him, then he’d be in for a good scolding.

He made a run for it.

Knocking around the duffle bag on his back, he ran the final 30 meters, with nowhere to hide. He rolled into the shadow of the L-shaped concrete wall that concealed the doorway to the locker room. He caught his breath, looked around once again, and finally felt a little at ease.

With both hands, he turned the doorknob with all of his might. The lock disengaged without the least resistance, leaving in his hands the sensation of worn down metal chafing against itself with a *click*.

At that moment, he heard the siren of a patrol car. Even though he knew that there was no way it involved him, Asaba unconsciously flinched and stopped in his tracks.

“There it is again,” he thought. He had heard it before as well, hiding in the shadows of the incinerator.

The siren melted as it faded into the distance, suddenly ceasing and disappearing.

“The patrol cars are out in full force tonight. I wonder if there was some kind of incident. That reminds me, shortly before summer vacation there was a circular notice that went around saying, ‘there is a possibility that a spy from the North is hiding in the vicinity, so be careful.’ I guess spies don’t give a damn about summer vacation.

He took a deep breath.

He quietly opened the door to the locker room, and peeked inside.

It was pitch black.

“It’s too dark. It’ll be impossible to change in here,” he thought. “Turning on the lights is out of the question.” After thinking about it for a bit, Asaba decided to just change where he stood. “It’s in the shadows of this covering concrete wall, so there’s probably no way anybody will come.”

He lowered his bag from his shoulders and pulled open the zipper. It was at that moment when Asaba realized his grave error.

This was on the way home from his mountain retreat.

In other words, the contents of his bag were all items for a mountain retreat. Things like a toothbrush, a towel, extra clothes, bug spray, a camera, and a small wireless transceiver. No matter how you think about it, there was no need for swimming trunks during a mountain retreat.

And thus, he had no swimming trunks. He was terribly disappointed.

Asaba crouched down. His disappointment resembled that time when he’d made a spur-of-the-moment decision the night before to go rent an adult video at a ridiculously far away video shop, only to realize when he laid his hands on the perfect video the next day that he had forgotten his wallet.

A wild idea ran through his mind.

“If it’s come to this, then should I just swim stark naked? Should I just go for something crazy like that?” For just a brief moment, he felt that swimming stark naked in the middle of the night in the school pool would actually feel kind of amazing. Then he became worried that maybe he had some kind of exhibitionism fetish. “Maybe going naked is a bad idea after all.”

He blindly dug through his bag, wondering if he had anything that could serve as a replacement for swimming trunks.

A pair of crumpled up short-shorts came out. It was the school designated gym short-shorts that he wore to sleep in his sleeping bag.

Making sure one more time that nobody was around, Asaba hastily took off his pants and boxers, and tried the short-shorts on. He took off his shirt too and looked down at himself. The short-shorts had unusual pockets, and unlike swimming trunks, they had no inner lining so they felt extra breezy.

“These don’t feel too bad,” he thought. “I’ve already come this far anyway.”

He strengthened his resolve. Asaba kicked his clothes into his bag and entered the locker room. Following the barely discernible silhouette of the lockers, he fumbled his way through the damp, chlorine-smelling darkness. He passed by the showers and the sterilization tank. While keeping aware of the slipperiness of the wet floor with the bottom of his foot, he thought about how it was definitely around this area last summer where Miyake was messing around and had gotten covered in blood.

Asaba vividly recalled Miyake’s cries, “Sensei, I’m going to dieeeee, I’m going to dieeeee,” and apologized in his mind.

“My bad, Miyake. You were just too hilarious that time.”

He pushed open the swinging door, and stepped onto the night poolside. There, Asaba’s amusing reminiscing ceased. Instantaneously, his attention was focused onto something else, and he stepped on a hose and nearly fell over.

There was somebody else by the night poolside.

It was a girl.

TL Footnotes

1. 中学二年の夏休み: a bit long in English, but there wasn’t really another way of putting it.

2. 仏

3. 科学的: scientific might sound strange, but it is the original text

4. 第五福竜丸: A Japanese tuna fishing boat, which was exposed to and contaminated by nuclear fallout from the United States’ Castle Bravo thermonuclear device test on Bikini Atoll, on 1 March 1954.

1-2

Chapter 1: Close Encounter of the Third Kind

1-2

There was a normal sized 25 x 15 meter pool. The starlight passing through the depths of the pool was reminiscent of the depth of countless light years, and easily drew the focus of Asaba's eyes over the almost magically calm surface of the water. It appeared as if the night sky was cut out into the shape of the pool. To Asaba, having just emerged from the darkness of the locker room, that view was curiously bright.

In that curiously bright view, a girl was crouching with her back to Asaba, tightly gripping the handrail next to her. She wore a school swimsuit and a swimming cap. She stared intently at the pitch-black metallic surface of the water.

He didn't even wonder who she was. Having run into such an unexpected situation, he was unable to think of anything. Asaba simply stood there stone-footed, like a wooden plank. Although he had been careful not to be seen by anyone, he also didn't really take the possibility of anyone being there in the first place seriously.

He had forced open the locker room door, and it wasn't like he'd walked through without making any footsteps. If that girl had been there from the beginning, then there was no way that she wouldn't have heard those sounds. And yet, as far as Asaba could see, she gave absolutely no indication that she had noticed Asaba's existence. With her back to Asaba, she remained completely still, and continued to gaze intently at the surface of the water.

An indescribable seriousness emanated from her back. A feeling of tension hung in the air, as if she would jump and drown herself at any moment.

She moved. Firmly gripping the handrail with her right hand, she reached out with her left hand and touched the surface of the water. Carefully, as if she was

performing some kind of experiment, she stirred the water gently with her fingers. Several ripples formed on the tranquil surface of the water, extending across like radar waves, and lapped gently against the edge of the pool. She stared intently at the ripples.

“I wonder who she is,” he finally thought. “I wonder if she’s a student at this school. Her school swimsuit looks like the one this school has, but there’s no nametag. I think she’s about the same age as I am, but I can’t say for sure just looking at her from behind.”

A large bag lay diagonally behind her, as if somebody had thrown it aside. There were clothes freshly strewn around it.

“I guess those must be her bag and clothes.” He paused. “In other words, she probably changed into her swimsuit right on this poolside.”

He began to contemplate profoundly. “Why was I born as a human?” He wanted to point and scream, “Why wasn’t I born as this coiled up hose at my feet, or that deck brush hanging on that wall? Bathing in the starlight by a pool in an empty school in the middle of the night, a girl slowly took off her clothes, one piece at a –”

Asaba forced what followed out of his mind with sheer willpower.

The intense seriousness emanating from the girl’s back made Asaba suddenly feel uncomfortable. He felt embarrassed for having such worthless delusions.

He had no idea why she was here, or what she was doing. But he felt that it was extremely unfair that she didn’t notice him at all. “Even though I have no dirty intentions, this is basically the same as peeping.” He decided to call out to her. “I should let her know I’m here.”

Having no idea how he should call out to her, or what to say, Asaba took a deep breath.

It was terrible timing. At the very moment Asaba was about to speak after taking a breath, the girl suddenly tried to stand up. Since she had been crouching for such a long time, she staggered a bit as she rose.

“Um...”

She jumped in surprise at Asaba's single word, and tried to turn around to face him. The delicate balance that she had barely maintained finally crumbled to pieces.

Their eyes met for an instant.

The whites of her eyes opened in surprise were left staring upward into space as she fell bottom-first into the pool. Along with an impressive splash, large drops of water scattered onto the tiles of the poolside.

Asaba also panicked. He lost his nerve in the face of this sudden development. "Should I just run away?" he thought. Looking around in confusion, he finally noticed something obvious. The pool was surrounded by a tall and thin wall. It wasn't a one-way mirror, so if he couldn't see into the pool from the outside, that meant he couldn't see the outside from inside the pool either. He had a feeling that the night watch Sensei or somebody would come in yelling at any moment.

"I have to get out of here."

After quite bit of hesitation, he finally made his decision. He made an about-face towards the locker room, but his feet froze.

The splashing hadn't stopped.

The girl was thrashing about in the water. From time to time, her arms and legs would pop out of the water at surprising angles, and flap about before sinking again.

He thought she had been fooling around. Even after noticing that she really was drowning, his body that was getting ready to run away failed to respond immediately.

He hastily made his way towards the pool and leapt in. Since he jumped in feet-first, air gathered in his short-shorts and they inflated in the water like a pumpkin.

Using both of his arms to push his way through the water, he walked towards her. Closing one eye to avoid the sheets of water being sprayed everywhere by her arms and legs, he stretched out his hand and yelled, "Here, grab on. You should be —"

Able to stand here, right? The instant he was about to utter those words, the girl clung onto him. His foot slipped on the bottom of the pool, and before he even had a chance to let out a cry of surprise, his head had plunged underwater.

It was pitch black, and he couldn't see anything. The girl continued to cling onto him, and he couldn't move or breathe. He panicked.

In an instant, he no longer had any idea what was going on. He had no idea where he should reach out to grab the edge of the pool, no idea where the surface of the water or the bottom of the pool was, and no idea whether his body was facing upwards or downwards. It was like he was struggling for survival in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

Asaba tried to shake her off, but the more he struggled, the more the girl desperately clung onto him. She had an unbelievable amount of strength. "At this rate, I'm seriously going to drown too," he thought. "My feet should be able to reach the bottom here. This is right next to the edge of the pool," he desperately told himself. He frantically felt around with his arm and both of his legs.

His fingertips touched the edge of the pool, and the tips of his toes touched the bottom. He had somehow straightened himself out. With great difficulty, both of their heads emerged above the water. "I'm saved," he thought as he violently coughed from the water that had entered his respiratory tract.

What felt like a bottomless swamp just a few moments ago actually turned out to be only chest-deep when Asaba actually put down both of his legs and stood up. "Haha," he chuckled softly.

He raised his face. What happened next went far beyond just their eyes meeting. Less than the length of a cigarette away, for the first time in his life he was at point blank range from a girl's face. The two of them were still breathing wildly, and the two of them were still holding onto each other. Both of their bodies swayed gently in the wake of the water that they had thrashed about in.

She was slightly shorter than Asaba. Droplets of water dripped from the ends of her hair sticking out of the edge of her swimming cap. She stared directly at Asaba with an expression that seemed like she was looking at another human being for the first time since she was born.

In a school at night where there shouldn't have been anyone there, on a poolside at night where there shouldn't have been anyone there, Asaba and this girl that he had never seen before were illuminated by the starlight. It hardly felt like reality.

She tilted her head slightly to the side, and tried to say something. It sounded like the voice of an infant that had not yet learnt how to speak, wanting to ask something, or an interjection in a foreign language.

Suddenly, her body tensed up. She backed up half a step away from Asaba, turned her face away and covered her nose and mouth with her hands.

With that, Asaba, who had been charmed by the face of the girl in front of him, was immediately pulled back to reality. "Do I really smell that bad?" he thought to himself, panicking. He secretly breathed into the palm of his hand and checked if he had bad breath.

She choked with a *cough*. Asaba was so surprised he thought he would have a heart attack. She was coughing up blood. Blood dripped from the spaces between the fingers of her hands covering her mouth.

"!! Ah, Wah, Uwah! Um, !" Asaba stammered.

The girl cast an upward glance at Asaba, who was completely flustered, and finally said at an audible level, "Nosebleed." She scooped up water with one hand and wiped away the blood dripping from her nose down her mouth. Asaba was mistaken about her coughing up blood, and when he looked carefully, it really was just a nosebleed.

But both were pretty much the same to Asaba. "In any case, I have to do something," he thought. There was no change in that. He jumped out of the pool with the force of a rocket, and made his way towards the girl's bag lying on the poolside. Trying his best not to look at the girl's clothes scattered about, he grabbed the massive zipper, whose width was about the size of his thumb.

The flustered portion of his brain was thinking, "There must be at least a towel in here," and the tiny remaining calm portion of his brain was thinking, "This really isn't a very feminine bag." The bag was dark green, made of strong and rigid feeling material, and had several large pockets attached to it. It resembled the bags that the soldiers at the Sonohara Base carried around. He pulled open

the zipper in one motion, pulled out the bath towel sitting on the very top, and involuntarily gasped when he saw what lay directly beneath it.

There were three plastic bottles about the size of a juice can, stuffed to the brim with pills. “I saw something I shouldn’t have,” he thought to himself.

Asaba hastily zipped up the bag. At any rate, since he was in such a panic, and since the impact of the bottles filled with drugs stole his attention, he didn’t really get to see anything else. Because of that, Asaba just happened to miss noticing the grip of “something he *really* shouldn’t have seen,” sticking out right next to the bottles: something that was 9mm caliber and loaded with 16 rounds.

Towel in hand, and doing his best to put on a nonchalant expression, Asaba hurried back to the pool. The girl was finally trying to get out of the pool, and she was in a compromising position, like she was trying to put her leg over a horizontal bar and climb over. Asaba was intent on not staring, and looked away from her almost unnaturally.

“Here,” he said while handing her the towel. After waiting for a little while, he looked back at her again, only to be met by her upturned gaze. Sitting on the edge of the pool with her legs in the water, she was pressing both ends of the towel resting on her shoulders up against her nose. It looked like the nosebleed was finally settling down, but he was startled at the red that was staining the towel.

It still felt like he had wandered just a step away from reality. “Honestly speaking, this feels kind of creepy,” he thought. A substantial part of him wanted to quickly leave and tell her, “Well, I’ll be going now.”

But the girl continued staring intently at Asaba. He looked away from her again. He had a feeling that if he just left her here like this, she would continue sitting by the pool forever.

“Did you see?” the girl suddenly asked.

Asaba was taken by surprise, and was at a loss for words. “Even though I was in a panic after seeing blood, opening her bag without permission was wrong,” Asaba thought. “Plus, being asked directly like this and still playing dumb feels kind of unfair to her, and unmanly.”

Eyeballing a distance not too close to her, yet not too far from her, Asaba sat down at the edge of the pool just like her.

“Are you sick?”

For just an instant, the girl looked somewhat puzzled, and then immediately shook her head. Expecting some kind of an explanation to follow, Asaba waited for her next words, but the girl remained silent. Asaba couldn't stand the silence, and felt like he had to say something.

“What's your name?”

“Iriya,” the girl answered.

No matter what she said, it sounded like she was speaking in a foreign language. Her voice was mysterious, and had an awkward feeling to it.

“Is that your first name? Last name?”

Taking a breath, the girl answered, “Iriya, Kana.”

1-3

Chapter 1: Close Encounter of the Third Kind

1-3

“It’s probably spelled ‘Iriya¹,’” he thought. “There’s a place with that name in Sonohara City.” The girl was waiting patiently for Asaba’s next words. “I have to say something.”

“You can’t swim?” he asked. After saying that, he thought to himself, “You idiot, can’t you ask something a little bit more substantive? Of course she can’t swim; didn’t you just save her from drowning moments ago?”

Avoiding direct eye contact with her, Asaba watched as she nodded. “I have to say something,” he thought. That’s what he thought, but being led along along by a girl who only spoke in incomplete sentences, he was unable to properly formulate a meaningful question from all of the suspicions swirling around in his mind. If he took those raw suspicions and put them into words, it would be three simple words: “Who are you?” He couldn’t imagine this girl giving a clear answer to such a question.

The silence continued, the tension increased all the more, and the more he hurried trying to think of something to say, the more the only words that came to mind were, “Well, I’ll be going now.”

“You can swim?” the girl suddenly asked.

“She’s asking me if I can swim,” he realized. It took him a little while before he fully comprehended that. With those three words, the floodgates opened. “Hey, if you’d like I could teach you how to swim,” he said. He thought to himself, “This girl can’t swim, and although I’m not exactly the best at it, I still can. I can probably make a bit of a good impression here.”

After saying that, he felt a bit of hesitation towards his own idea. “This girl just had a nosebleed. Her bag was stuffed with strange drugs. I don’t know how she feels about it, but maybe it’s impossible for her to even swim in the first place.”

Nevertheless, her face lit up just a bit, and she nodded. Just looking at that face, Asaba all too easily got excited.

“Wait here just a second,” Asaba said. He quickly headed towards the equipment storehouse to grab a kickboard. Sensing a presence behind him, Asaba suddenly turned around. Even though he had told her to wait there, the girl was following him like a puppy. The entire time Asaba was digging through the mountain of kickboards trying to find the cleanest and least slimy one, his back was burning up from her gaze.

He began to think. “Perhaps this girl, more than just not knowing how to swim, has never swam in her life until today. Despite that, wanting to swim no matter what, she probably made a considerable decision to come here. That has to be it,” Asaba baselessly thought.

“When I asked her if she was sick, she shook her head. But even if she’s not sick in the traditional sense of the word, walking around with that many drugs is definitely not normal. Maybe she was born with a weak body, and has finally just recovered from a major chronic illness. That’s got to be it,” Asaba thought. “In the past, this girl lived her life going in and out of the hospital, frequently missed school, and because of that always had to sit out during gym class and watch, and during swim class all she did was watch her friends swim, and yet she became completely fascinated with swimming, and now just recently her body’s finally recovered, so she asked her mother, ‘Can I go to the pool?’ but her mother replied, ‘What on Earth is this child saying, of course you can’t, oh look at the time, have you taken your medicine yet?’ and yet despite that, she couldn’t give up on swimming, and quietly snuck out of the house and came to the pool, that’s it, that’s definitely it,” Asaba thought.

If he thought about it like that, he felt like all of the pieces fit together, explaining that feeling he had about why she was so sensitive, that intense and brooding aura she emanated as she was staring at the pool, why she was seriously wearing a swimming cap, the nosebleed, the drugs, all of it.

Grabbing two kickboards, he returned to the pool and jumped in feet first with a *splash*. The girl hesitated for a moment on the edge of the pool, and then jumped in feet first like Asaba. It looked like she was trying to mimic everything Asaba did exactly.

He handed her a kickboard and said, "As long as you hold onto this, you won't drown." Suddenly he felt worried, and asked, "Hey, can you put your face in the water?" The girl nervously shook her head.

And so, that's where they had to begin from first. That was also what took up the most time. No matter how much he tried to encourage her, or tried to calm her down, she couldn't seem to put her face in the water. However, after quite a bit of time, she was able to put her entire head in the water, and everything after that went quickly. She practiced holding onto the edge of the pool and stretching her body, kicking her legs, breathing, and finally moved onto practice using the kickboard.

With that, it was about ten minutes past 9 P.M. of the final day of his middle school second year summer vacation. At that time, the girl was already able to swim about 15 meters holding onto the kickboard. Her knees were bending while she was kicking, so despite the impressive amount of water splashing everywhere, she was moving along pretty sluggishly, and if Asaba left her alone, she would steadily drift to the right. That being said, when he looked back at how she had started off sinking like a rock, they had made considerably rapid progress. "She was probably an athletic person to begin with," he thought.

Asaba, the coach, was also scared to death at the beginning, and was planning on stopping immediately if the girl had another nosebleed. But, upon seeing the quickness with which she improved, he gradually wanted to do more.

As usual, the girl was completely reticent, and only nodded or shook her head in response to Asaba's words; but every time she was able to learn something, her expression brightened little by little.

"Wow, you're amazing. If you keep it up at this pace, you'll be the ace of the swim team by next week," Asaba said. The girl had a slightly pleased expression. In the span of about an hour, Asaba had somehow learned to read these "minor" and subtle changes. Up until now, this was her happiest face.

"Alright then, it's about time to graduate from using a kickboard," Asaba said. The girl's expression stiffened instantly. "I'm telling you, it'll be fine. You can already swim on your own; it's the same with or without the kickboard."

The girl nodded. Asaba could tell that it wasn't just because she was convinced

by what she was told; it was also because she was determined not to disappoint him.

“H-Hey,” Asaba immediately compromised. “In that case, I’ll be holding your hands in the beginning. That’ll be fine, right?” Asaba said and held out his hands. This time, the girl showed a slightly relieved expression, like she was convinced. She stretched out her hands and grabbed Asaba’s wrists. Asaba’s hands grabbed onto her wrists as well.

Then, Asaba finally noticed “*that*.”

In that instant, the girl also noticed that Asaba had noticed it, and stiffened up in surprise. Up until now, she herself had probably forgotten that “*that*” was on her wrists.

Asaba felt her wrists with the tips of his fingers. There was something hard and round. He turned her wrists over slowly. A metallic silver sphere, about the size of an egg yolk, was embedded in her wrists.

The girl stared at him intently. The water’s movement gently rocked their bodies. He felt as if reality drifted away again, shaken by the water.

“It doesn’t hurt,” she said. Holding out her hands so that Asaba could better see the metallic spheres, she moved closer to him.

He recalled his earlier raw suspicions. What he should have asked before doing anything was: “Who are you?”

“It’s nothing,” she said. The positions of superiority reversed. Now it was her that was telling Asaba not to be afraid. Asaba tried to move back, but was entranced by her intense gaze and foreign-sounding voice. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t take that first step back.

“You want to lick it?” She was already right in front of his eyes. The only thing between their faces was the metallic sphere embedded in her wrists. “It tastes like electricity.” The school at night that should have been empty, the pool at night that should have been empty, the starlight, this unknown girl, nothing felt like reality.

Suddenly, he heard the siren of a patrol car.

Asaba was so surprised that he let out a pathetic scream. He heard it extremely close by. It came from either within the school grounds, or from the roads surrounding the schoolyard. He could see the reflection of the flashing patrol car lights on the gymnasium window. It wasn't just one or two cars.

The girl was silent. Her expression did slightly change, but in Asaba's eyes, she didn't look even one-tenth as surprised as he was. That fact increased Asaba's panic even further.

"In any case, I have to do something," he thought. Without knowing what was going on, Asaba pulled the girl's hand and was completely caught up in trying to get out of the pool.

Then, before Asaba reached the edge of the pool, a man appeared. Emerging from the swinging locker room door, he walked slowly towards the poolside. He was a tall man, but Asaba couldn't tell how old he was.

Hanging his suit jacket over his shoulder, he was already holding a towel in one hand. He wasn't wearing a necktie. He had a young face, droopy eyes, and seemed like the type that would always tell vulgar jokes and laugh at them alone. However, he had a kind of terribly tired, worn down aura hanging around him.

"It's time to go home," the man said, stopping at the poolside and staring straight at the girl.

Asaba felt like reality went down the pool drain and disappeared along with the blood from the girl's nosebleed. He had no idea what was going on. He was confused, and he'd be lying if he said that he wasn't afraid. However, Asaba put on a bold front. Taking one step forward, he stood in a position covering the girl behind him. The man looked at him, and made a face like he had seen something unexpected and impressive.

"It's okay, I know him," the girl whispered from behind.

Despite that, without taking his eyes off of the man, Asaba asked over his shoulder, "Who is he?"

The man answered, "Let's see. I guess I'm something of an older brother to her. Who are you?"

Asaba swallowed his saliva, and purposely put on an irritated voice. "A student

of this school.” He held back from speaking with honorifics².

The man slowly looked at his surroundings. “And what are you doing here at this hour?”

“I wanted to swim.”

Upon hearing Asaba’s words, the man suddenly broke into laughter. “So that’s how it is. Now I see. Summer vacation ends today, after all.” The man crouched by the edge of the pool. Looking at Asaba with a broad grin, the man said, “I also used to do that a lot in the past. At the school I was at, there was this live-in janitor who was one hell of an angry old man. Although in my case, rather than going for a swim, it was more of a dare from my buddy. I was swimming around making a huge racket, and one out of two times this old man would come flying out holding a broom, but that’s what I was going for in the first place so I didn’t let myself get caught. After making my great escape, I’d make a prank call to the old man’s house, ‘Ahh, Nagasawa-kun—’ this is an imitation of the principal, Nagasawa is the old man’s name, ‘Ahh, Nagasawa-kun, about that thing. You can’t even catch those kids sneaking into the pool? If you can’t, I’m going to fire you.’ That old man was raging. Those were good times.”

Asaba sensed multiple people and cars outside of the pool. He heard the sound of quiet engines, tires biting into the gravel, doors being slammed shut. He was surrounded. And yet, nobody other than this man had entered the pool.

He had no idea who this man was either. That aura he had of an older and experienced brother didn’t seem pretentious to Asaba. However, on the contrary, Asaba was kind of disgusted by it.

“Um,” Asaba began. It was his raw suspicion again: who are you guys? And just like the girl, he couldn’t imagine this man giving him a clear answer either. Asaba had just begun to speak, but his words suddenly lost momentum as the man cut him off.

“Even now I’m thankful for that. You know, old man Nagasawa played along with all of our stupid games. It was obvious who was messing around each and every time, and even if he didn’t catch us, our names should’ve been identified. But the old man didn’t say anything about us to the teachers. And that’s why, well, even now I’m pretty lenient with pranksters like you,” he said, staring

intently at Asaba.

“I’ll keep quiet about you being here, so don’t ask anything.” That’s what he was saying. Asaba comprehended that. Asaba stared at the man and nodded quietly.

The man gave him a big grin. He pulled a wireless transceiver from his jacket pocket, and said, “I’m done in here. There’s 1 C, I’m coming out right now.” He spoke quickly, and then stretched as he stood up.

“Alright, time to get out. Don’t forget to put away the kickboards. Wash your eyes too. Oh, and you,” he turned and faced the girl, “Today’s your first time swimming right?”

Using Asaba’s hand to get out of the pool, the girl uttered three words: “He taught me.”

The man had a surprised expression. Tossing a towel towards the girl’s head, the man said, “Thanks for looking after her. Here, you too.” Putting his hand on her towel, he recklessly pushed her head downward and made her bow. “You leave first. The guys outside won’t hurt you.”

Asaba’s head was spinning. He had a ton of things he wanted to say, things he wanted to ask. Walking along the poolside with uneasy steps, Asaba pushed open the swinging locker room door and turned around. The man waved to him. The girl stood next to him, like a poorly balanced doll. She stared intently at Asaba from the shadows of the towel covering her head.

None of this felt like reality to Asaba.

He’d forgotten to put away the kickboards and wash his eyes, but the man didn’t say a thing.

TL Notes:

1. 伊里野

2. He refrains from using “desu”

Chapter 1: Close Encounter of the Third Kind

1-4

Asaba Naoyuki's summer of UFOs began after school on June 24th, dating back 2 months from now.

In Sonohara Middle School, class 3-2, there existed a rather high spec'd man named Suizenji Kunihiro. He was #12 on the class attendance list, 175cm¹ tall even though he was only 15 years old, placed in the 81st percentile for the National Mock Examinations, ran an 11 second 100-meter dash, and had a pretty decent looking face. However, Asaba had always felt that this man's way of utilizing his energy was off ever since his he was born. In any case, this was a man who, on his career path questionnaire, seriously wrote "CIA" as his number one ambition.

In addition to being in class 3-2, #12 on the attendance list, 175cm, 81st percentile, and capable of an 11 second 100-meter dash, Suizenji Kunihiro was also the self-styled President / Editor-in-Chief of the Sonohara Middle School Newspaper Club, reason for "self-styled" being that the Newspaper Club was not officially recognized as a club by the school. The members had always been only third year student Suizenji and second year student Asaba, but Sudou Akiho, who had entered into the same class with Asaba last spring, came barging in for some reason, saying, "Maybe I'll join too."

With that, there were three club members. According to school regulations, if you have three members in a club, you can apply for official club status, which if successful will land you a clubroom and club funds. That's why Akiho was always pestering them to apply, but the all-important Suizenji had absolutely no intention of doing so. He even had an amazing reason for that: "In order to protect our journalistic integrity and autonomy, we must maintain a careful distance from the system." To which Akiho would reply, "That's so stupid."

But Asaba had a feeling that even if Suizenji were to apply, the club wouldn't be recognized by the school anyway. It was pretty obvious from the content of the newspaper. In Sonohara Middle School, even if there were people who were unaware that Suizenji Kunihiro could run an 11 second 100-meter dash, there wasn't a single person who wasn't aware of the fact that Suizenji Kunihiro was a fan of the supernatural. Furthermore, to Suizenji, the almighty CIA was the only means of revealing the truth behind supernatural phenomena. The reason why Suizenji aspired to join the CIA seemed to be, according to Suizenji himself, "to become a super prodigious covert operative and do things like participate in secret operations, and to get to a position where I can read secret documents. Then everything that I've ever wanted to know will probably be revealed." That "everything that I've ever wanted to know" generally changed depending on the season.

For example, the "Suizenji Theme" for last winter was, "Do telekinetic powers truly exist?" At that time, Suizenji (and Asaba) took over the broadcasting room during lunch break, performed a telepathy experiment on all of the students in the school, and got told-off by the teacher.

And when spring came around, the "Suizenji Theme" changed to, "Do ghosts truly exist?" At that time, Suizenji (and Asaba) snuck into the girls' bathroom at the Teito line's Ichikawadaimon station, which was rumored to have ghost appearances, in the middle of the night to collect data, but they had the police called on them, and got told-off by the teacher.

In other words, that was the type of newspaper this was, with this kind of man as its Editor-in-Chief. Even its name, just up until a little while ago, was, "The Solar System Radio Wave Newspaper."

However, after Akiho joined, things changed just a little. Even though articles related to "Suizenji Themes" still took up about 70% of the newspaper, the "Serious Articles" that Akiho was in charge of were also steadily expanding into that territory. Just recently, Akiho made a bold demand during an Editors Meeting, saying, "We need to change the name of the newspaper." At the end of a heated verbal argument that lasted for five hours, Asaba's mediation approach finally bore fruit, and the argument tentatively ended with a compromise between the two of them that barely balanced on the edge of a cliff, agreeing to

the name, “The Sonohara Radio Wave Newspaper.” When Asaba asked what he thought of the new newspaper title, Nishikubo, who sat next to him, said, “With ‘Solar System,’ the title seemed too epic and everyone laughed at it, but now with ‘Sonohara,’ it feels like the ‘radio waves’ are a lot closer and it feels pretty cool.”

With that being said, Suizenji Kunihiro spent the day going on a rampage, using an empty room in the clubroom building as his headquarters. Once a month, the Sonohara Radio Wave Newspaper would repeatedly wage a guerilla bulletin board war, putting up cheap-looking, but profoundly deep content, newspapers all over the bulletin boards throughout the school.

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Translator Notes

- 1. 175cm = 5’9”

Chapter 1: Close Encounter of the Third Kind

1-5

Going back two months from the present, it was June 24th, after school.

With Suizenji's interest towards the spring's Suizenji Theme, "spiritual phenomena," showing no signs of letting up, Asaba was hard at work performing physical labor. Staggering under the weight of the load he was carrying with both hands, he finally made it to the clubroom building. He felt that temporarily placing the load down on the ground outside would be too much of a hassle, and thinking that Akiho was probably already in there, called out to her. "Akiho, if you're in there, open up."

He was right. The door to the clubroom that the Newspaper Club was unlawfully occupying opened up, and Sudou Akiho peeked out. Her eyes widened in surprise at the massive load that Asaba was carrying. "What's that?"

Asaba entered the clubroom and dropped the load on the table. He sunk into a nearby folding chair and let out a sigh. "Man, that was so heavy." The load was a mountain of yearbooks that he'd borrowed and brought from the library. Roughly 20 yearbooks were piled up about 50 centimeters high. Being made of high quality paper, they were quite heavy. "That's not all of them. There are still two mountains left, about the same size as this one. Being in an old school is such a pain."

Akiho responded with a bewildered expression, "Like I said earlier, what are you going to do with that?"

"Ah, you haven't heard from the President yet?"

"Heard what?"

"The plan for the July edition. That 'Terrifying! Spirit photos found in yearbooks!' thing."

“Huh? Wasn’t the next plan going to be that thing about the Ouija¹ board?”

Asaba took out the oolong tea can that had been rolling around in his pocket the whole time, pulled open the pop-top and said, “The ‘Ask the Ouija board! The Predict the Exam Question Experiment!’ thing right? That’s been canned.”

“Why!?”

Asaba was a little surprised when Akiho suddenly raised her voice. He thought to himself, “If this mere three-man Newspaper Club was to have its own different factions, Suizenji would be in the Conservative party and Akiho would be in the Reform party. Akiho, who’s aiming for a ‘serious newspaper,’ should have been happy to hear that any one of Suizenji’s plans fell apart.” With a mouthful of oolong tea, Asaba looked up at Akiho, wondering if she would continue.

Akiho looked away grumpily, and callously sat down on the folding chair that she had been using up until Asaba came. She had a laptop in front of her, and the cursor on the screen was flashing at the center of an unfinished article that she was working on, titled, “Adopt a Puppy.” Placing her hands on the keyboard, Akiho suddenly said, “But Asaba, didn’t you spend so much time investigating and researching? You mean all of that’s just going to go to waste?”

“Can’t help it. It’s not like the President canned it without any reason either. You know how sometimes the President or I stay overnight in the clubroom, right? If Kawaguchi were to catch wind of this exam question prediction thing, he’d get the wrong idea and say, ‘you guys wouldn’t be planning on sneaking into the faculty office at night, would you?’”

Speaking of which, Kawaguchi Taizou, 35 year old bachelor, “servant of science,” and Asaba and Akiho’s homeroom teacher, was naturally on extremely bad terms with Suizenji Kunihiro, member of class 3-2 and #12 on the attendance list and 175cm tall and in the 81st percentile and holder of an 11 second 100 meter dash and “seeker of truth.”

“Apparently, Kawaguchi briefly mentioned that at a morning faculty meeting. It looks like the President was also called into the faculty office and given a pretty stern warning by the homeroom teacher. It sounded like it was turning into something really troublesome, so he said we might as well figure out a new plan

if exam questions were such a problem,” Asaba said.

“The President said that?”

“He did.”

Akiho furrowed her eyebrows slightly and said, “It’s kind of hard to believe that *that* guy, Suizenji Kunihiro, would just give up like that after being warned by a teacher.”

“Well, he’s a pretty hard guy to understand. He wasn’t frustrated or anything at all. To him, it was probably all the same thing, whether it was the Ouija board or this spirit photo thing, and he probably only thought of this whole incident as if there was poop on the road and he had to walk and jump over it.”

“On the contrary, I’m the one who’s frustrated,” Asaba thought.

Finishing off the rest of his oolong tea in one go, Asaba composed himself and stood up, “Alright then.” He grabbed a few volumes from the mountain of yearbooks, and dropped them on the table. “You know, I think this plan is also a pretty good one. Old photos are kind of creepy in and of themselves, and just by finding a good one and framing it properly, it should come out as a pretty convincing piece. It doesn’t really matter if it really is a spirit photo or not.”

“If you say so,” Akiho responded, returning to her “Adopt a Puppy” article.

“What do you mean by that?” Asaba returned, unable to understand what she was saying.

“I humbly submit only before he who has treated me so kindly,” Akiho typed in romaji². She finally raised her face from the LCD screen, and glared at Asaba with watery eyes. “What’s with that laaaame, ‘It doesn’t really matter if it really is a spirit photo or not,’ nonsense. I already know. I see right through you. You *always* act like, ‘Oh, I can’t help it, I’m just following the President,’ but in reality you actually like those kinds of things. Telekinetic powers and ghosts and that kind of stuff.”

Speaking to Asaba, who was responsible for raising her two-month-old male crossbreed dog, she continued, “I’m not going to help out with that plan. Hmph, I don’t care. By the time you finish going through all those yearbooks you brought here, an entire Zodiac cycle³ will definitely have passed. And when you

show that to the President, all he's going to do is scream, 'Whose arm is that!?' once every two pages. **Sigh** and I thought you were a neutral authority in all of this. It looks like my only ally in this club is myself. **Sigh** the path of a reformist sure is harsh."

At that moment, "STOP!!" He must have been eavesdropping from just outside the door. "Who are you to speak about reform!? Is your reform the kind that swings back and forth between joy and despair whenever the sports clubs win or lose!? Is it the kind where you search for an owner for a cat or a dog!? Answer, Correspondent Sudou!"

Suizenji came barging in, practically kicking the door down. He held a melon bread in his right hand,⁴ and a Tetra Pak[®] ⁵ of milk in his left⁶. The silver rims of the hipster glasses⁷ that he wore depending on his mood sparkled.

Dumbfounded by the President's vigor, Asaba asked, "D-Did something good happen?"

Akiho glanced coldly at him and said, "So stupid."

Suizenji chuckled and said, "Correspondent Sudou, it's obvious that you still bear a grudge towards not being able to get rid of the words "Radio Wave" from the newspaper name. Certainly, it is appropriate that the crowning name of your petty reformative newspaper would be 'The Sonohara Middle School Newspaper.' BUT! The now formerly titled 'Solar System Radio Wave Newspaper' transmitted a variety of genres as massive as the solar system itself instantaneously like radio waves—"

Akiho kicked her chair and stood up. "I want to renovate the Newspaper Club! I don't want to dissect the common sense of the world with radio waves, unlike *someone* here! In the first place, what are we going to do if we drive away readers because of the name!?"

Stuck between a rock and a hard place in the face of this suddenly resurrected argument, Asaba chuckled. "President, you're still bothered by losing the 'Solar System Radio Wave Newspaper?'"

"Heck yeah. Really bothered. Anyway, Correspondent Asaba." Suizenji pointed at the yearbooks stacked up like a mountain on top of the table with his melon

bread holding hand, like he was shooting a gun. “Would you mind telling me what that is?”

Asaba was at a loss for words. It was Suizenji that had ordered him to go and borrow these yearbooks from the library and bring them here in the first place. “Those are yearbooks. I borrowed them from the library.”

“Correspondent Asaba. Would you mind telling me why these are here?”

Akiho, who was standing nearby, also furrowed her eyebrows. Asaba was completely confused, and said, “Uhm. Weren’t we going to dig up a photo we can use from these?”

“Correspondent Asaba. What in the world is, ‘a photo we can use?’”

Asaba instinctively turned around and looked at Akiho, who made a face as if saying, ‘Don’t look at me, I have no idea either.’

The two of them responded at the same time. “President, wasn’t this your idea? ‘Spirit photos found in yearbooks.’ The new plan for the July edition.” “I heard it from Asaba. You cancelled the other plan, right?”

Suizenji let out a long sigh. Looking into the distance like he was gazing at a beautiful sunset, he muttered softly, “It’s cancelled.”

Asaba heard him.

But Akiho didn’t hear him. She responded, “Hah?”

“IT’S CANCELLED!!” Suizenji suddenly roared like Godzilla. Placing his hand on his forehead, he walked briskly across the clubroom shaking his head irately. “Answer! Answer me, the both of you!! Aaaaahhhh, Good Lord! You two are still caught up on that stupid spiritual phenomena thing!?”

Throwing open the window at the end of the clubroom, Suizenji looked up at the June 24th, after-school blue sky and screamed like he was firing an anti-aircraft missile. **“YOU GUYS ARE SO BEHIND!!!!!!”**

Closing the window softly with both hands, Suizenji turned his back to the light shining through the window. In a completely opposite and quiet tone of voice, he said, “Alright then, the two of you. Do you know what today, in other words, June 24th, is?”

Asaba and Akiho looked at each other again. Akiho looked at Asaba with an expression that asked, “What’s with him? Did he eat something weird?” Asaba shook his head, silently saying, “I have no idea.”

Akiho eventually responded hesitantly, “Thursday?”

Asaba guessed, “Toilet paper day.”

“Wrong,” Suizenji solemnly answered. “June 24th is, throughout the world, UFO Day.”

TL Notes

1. Ouija board: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ouija>
2. Romaji: ローマ字. Roman alphabet characters, as opposed to kanji or hiragana.
3. Zodiac cycle: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_zodiac
4. 馬手: < word used. The hand you hold the reins in when horse-riding (right hand).
5. Tetra Pak[®] : [type of package](#)
6. 弓手: <word used. The hand you hold a bow in (left hand).
7. 伊達メガネ: <word used. Definition would more accurately be “glasses that are worn for fashion, as opposed to for correcting vision.” But same idea.

1-6

Chapter 1: Close Encounter of the Third Kind

1-6

“Ohh.”

Asaba and Akiho finally understood. Suizenji Themes changed with the season. The winter of telekinetic powers had passed, the spring of spiritual phenomena had gone by as well, and the day when the target of Suizenji’s interest was completely updated had come around once again without any warning.

Asaba’s shoulders drooped disappointedly. Akiho returned to “Adopt a Puppy.” Cycling through the different characters of “Shibaken¹” with the spacebar², she said, “I see. It’s that time of year already.”

Asaba simply said, “Man, it was so heavy...”

“Starting tomorrow I’ll come wearing summer clothes.”

Again, Asaba simply said, “Man, it was so heavy...”

Suddenly reverting back to a casual tone of voice, Suizenji said, “Hey you two, what are you guys doing acting so laid back? Show a bit of excitement here.”

“Fat chance,” Asaba and Akiho thought at the same time. The damage to Asaba was particularly severe. Casting a quick glance at the mountain of yearbooks on the table, Asaba felt like his body would sink into ground when he thought of having to go and return all of those yearbooks again.

“So in other words, you’re going to stop chasing ghosts, and you’re going to go chase UFOs?” Akiho asked.

“Yeah,” Suizenji nodded, crinkling his eyes, and laughed with an amazingly handsome face. Year after year, more than a few new female students get deceived by that smile and turn valuable stationery into love letters, then carry out the worst mistake you can make by stuffing them into Suizenji’s shoe locker.

Confirming one more time, Akiho asked, “Um, why exactly is June 24th UFO day?”

“Correspondent Sudou! You call yourself a correspondent of the Sonohara Radio Wave Newspaper?! Can you hold your head high with pride and claim that you’re giving your best as a journalist when you don’t even know that simple fact?!”

“Normal people don’t know that!”

“Then I’ll give you a hint. The time: Tuesday, June 24th, 1947. The place: North America, Washington State, Mount Rainier, approximately 9500 feet elevation.”

Asaba, who was still slowly recovering from the blow he was dealt earlier, reacted to the hint. “Huh? Hmm, where have I heard that before? Mount Rainier. I remember hearing that name. If I recall correctly, it was in some children’s book about UFOs I read a long time ago,” he contemplated.

“Um, the Kenneth Arnold incident³.” Asaba suddenly remembered that name and answered. The name was extremely familiar, and felt like an old, faceless and forgotten friend’s nickname. He was somewhat touched that that old name remained tucked away in the corner of his mind after all this time.

“As expected of Correspondent Asaba!” Suizenji walked towards the corkboard hanging on the wall, and stuck a round red sticker in the column under “Asaba” on the “Great Finds Chart.”

Turning around, Suizenji continued, “Flying in his light aircraft, Kenneth Arnold witnessed ‘nine unidentified flying objects soaring in the air over Mount Rainier like saucers skipping on water.’ Among all of the officially reported incidents, this was the very first UFO sighting, and from that point on, June 24th came to be known worldwide as UFO day.” Suizenji nodded contently.

However, Asaba was still reluctant to abandon the “spirit photos found in yearbooks” idea, and asked, “But what about next edition’s plan then? Do we have some kind of plan?”

“It goes without saying. Collecting data for this next project will take an excruciatingly long time. It will require thorough preparation.”

“Huh?”

“Correspondent Sudou, I entrust the entire July edition of the newspaper to you. Write as many serious articles as your heart so desires. We shall be preparing for top secret data gathering during that period.”

Asaba and Akiho simultaneously let out a dumbfounded, “Haah?”

“Y-You can’t just suddenly push all of that onto me!” Akiho exclaimed.

“U-Um, by ‘we,’ do you mean me and you, President?” Asaba asked.

“I’m worried about your physical endurance, Correspondent Asaba. Don’t bother with a bullworker⁴ or any kind of power drink⁵, just start training your body from here on out.”

Asaba felt a shiver down his spine. The sound of “top secret data gathering” was somewhat disturbing. He felt like he might be dragged to some outrageous place and forced to do something insane.

“When you say ‘top secret data gathering,’ where—“

“Hm? Just behind the mountains here.”

Asaba’s anxiety was slightly relieved upon hearing that. Unaware that letting his guard down here would lead to his entire summer being devoured, he continued to ask, “But why behind the mountains here?”

Suizenji laughed defiantly, and declared extremely matter-of-factly, “When it comes to UFOs, look behind the mountains.”

This all took place June 24th, after school, with summer approaching.

The winter of telekinetic powers had passed, the spring of spiritual phenomena had gone by as well, and Asaba Naoyuki’s summer of UFOs had arrived.

TL Notes

1. [Shibaken / Shibainu](#). An awesome breed of dog.

2. When typing in Japanese, you can cycle through character formations of words (different kanji used) using the spacebar, sort of like homophones in English. In this case: 芝健、芝賢、芝件、芝研, are all wrong characters to denote

‘Shibaken’ as a breed of dog.

3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenneth_Arnold_UFO_sighting
4. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bullworker> Bowflexin’
5. Original word is [養命酒 \(Youmeishu\)](#). If you try one tell me how it is.

Chapter 1: Close Encounter of the Third Kind

1-7

“Well?”

In order for Asaba to let out a sigh, he first had to take a breath. If he took a breath, that odor would permeate his nostrils no matter what: the stench of a damp washcloth and the smell of ground-up chalk. It was the odor of a classroom, the odor of school, the odor of summer vacation fading into the past, and the odor of the first day of second semester.

“Really? You seriously spent your entire summer vacation in the mountains behind Sonohara Base?”

Asaba lay flat on his face, exhausted, on his desk by the window. Without saying a word, he nodded, rubbing his chin against his folded arms. Nishikubo, who was standing beside Asaba’s desk and peering at his face, said, “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

He summed up Asaba’s summer vacation with that one sentence.

Just like what Asaba had predicted, he was given quite the scolding by Kawaguchi. The entire modern Japanese class went in one ear and right out the other, and he barely made it out alive to the day’s first passing period¹.

“So you really did all that stuff? Like pitching a tent in the middle of the mountains and cooking rice in a pot over a fire?” Nishikubo asked in a tone of voice that practically said, ‘Were you really doing all of those stupid things?’

Asaba answered absent-mindedly and a bit irately, “The President brought along a Kei truck², so we were able to go to the convenience store to buy things the whole time. We ate stuff like prepackaged bentos and pouch curry.”

In reality, he had practically eaten every type of prepackaged bento, and for a while it made him sick to his stomach to even look at pouch curry. Looking back on it, Asaba felt truly thankful for the times Akiho would bring special food up to

them.

“Besides, it wasn’t like I was really up there the entire time. About once every three or four days, whenever I felt like eating normal food or taking a shower, I’d go home. Apparently the President stayed the whole time, though.”

“Huh? So does that mean that the President spent the entire summer vacation without showering?”

“No way. A little below the hills in the direction of Ootsukidai there’s, uh, some kind of baseball field.”

Nishikubo also began to think, “What was it again? Some kind of commemorative sports park, right?”

“Right, that one. He’d wash using the water facilities there. Of course it was like that. We aren’t special forces or anything, so it’d be impossible for us to spend the entire summer vacation on our own in the mountains without having water or toilets over there in the first place.”

“But still, bathing in the water facilities. There are a lot of people over there, right?”

“Only during the day. There’d be a few cars with couples in them some nights. The President didn’t really care about them during the day, though.”

“Sounds like him,” Nishikubo laughed. Asaba couldn’t help smiling either. “So basically you guys were camping. Sounds like you had a pretty great time, huh?”

“Pretty much,” Asaba answered. He probably felt that way now because the bad memories had faded away. However, he felt like that wasn’t completely the reason why.

If he thought back carefully, he had a feeling that his summer vacation wasn’t entirely boring at all. They had succeeded at feeding a raccoon. They had done things like “gathering data” with firecrackers on cars rocking side to side in the park in the middle of the night. And, above all else, speaking perfectly honestly, his heart had raced at the idea of “setting up a ‘secret base’ and looking out for ‘enemies’ in the mountains, with just him and his buddy.” He didn’t think that they’d be committing to play “secret army base” at this age, but the President, despite being old enough to know better, earnestly put his heart and soul into it

and took it seriously. Despite a few times where Asaba felt like he was half forcing it, once he dived completely into it, there were definitely some “amazing” moments. It might not have been that terrible of a summer vacation after all. Furthermore, at the very end of it all, he felt like doing something wild, snuck into the pool, and—

“Hey.”

Asaba snapped back to reality after being hit on the shoulder by Nishikubo.

“What’s up with you, spacing out like that?”

“My bad. What were you saying?”

“As I was saying, you guys camped out behind the mountains of Sonohara Base searching for UFOs, right? Were you able to take at least one picture?”

“No way,” Asaba laughed. “We had a much higher chance of running into guys who came there to bury a corpse.”

“Man, how boring,” Nishikubo muttered.

Right when Nishikubo was about to lose interest in Asaba’s mountain camping trip, “Ah, I actually heard a story about that.” Hanamura, who was sitting in the seat in front of Asaba, turned around, sat backwards in his chair and broke into the conversation. Apparently he was listening to the entire conversation from there. “There’s a rumor dating pretty far back that says Sonohara Base is a UFO base.”

Nishikubo replied pretty skeptically, “Even I’ve heard of that rumor, but isn’t it just that? Didn’t they just mistakenly see like, a stealth fighter? You hear those kinds of UFO stories everywhere, not just in Sonohara. There are also plenty of UFO eyewitness accounts in cities with huge airfields. Especially since Sonohara Base is jointly operated by the JASDF³ and the USAF³, which launch aircraft at strange times of the day, even if people mistakenly think that they saw a UFO and make a big deal about it, the military wouldn’t go making an announcement saying, ‘That was actually one of our aircraft’ every single time it happened.”

“I’m just repeating what I heard from the President, but,” Asaba suddenly began, “The mysterious flying objects witnessed around Sonohara Base are called, ‘Area Sonohara⁴ Foo Fighters,’ and are apparently pretty famous among

UFO buffs. They're written about pretty often in those types of magazines. Foo Fighters originally refer to mysterious flying objects that Allied fighter pilots witnessed during World War II. They initially thought that they were some kind of German or Japanese secret weapon, but it turns out that after the war ended, German and Japanese pilots had seen the same thing and thought that they were some kind of Allied secret weapon. Nowadays though, they're considered to be either some kind of natural phenomena or collective hallucinations. But of course, to UFO buffs, if you mention Foo Fighters that's just another name for UFO."

Nishikubo and Hanamura listened to Asaba's story with half-amazed and half-dumbfounded expressions. Asaba noticed, and added, "Keep in mind, I'm just repeating what I heard from the President."

Nishikubo placed his hand on Asaba's shoulder. "Be honest, Asaba."

"W-What are you talking about?"

"C'mon now. Well? According to what the President said, what was the true identity of those Area Sonohara something-somethings?"

"Who knows? I can never really tell if he's being subtle or vague. I never asked him directly, but contrary to what I expect, he probably doesn't really care what their true identity is."

"Well, what do you think then?"

Asaba began to feel slightly cornered. "Among UFO buffs, the most plausible, or I guess the staple, theory is that 'Sonohara Base is launching manmade UFOs.' There are similar stories in America too. There are rumors that they recover crash-landed UFOs and copy their technology and make aircraft with amazing capabilities. That's probably it."

"So then, does that mean that when war finally breaks out that those UFO fighters will be zooming around?" Hanamura asked amusedly.

Nishikubo, acting dumbfounded, added, "Wouldn't that just be an amazingly advanced jet fighter? Why would you suddenly say that they use 'technology recovered from crash-landed UFOs'?"

Feeling like he was being mocked, Asaba became annoyed. But in reality, even

Asaba didn't completely believe that "manmade UFO" theory. Feeling somewhat masochistic, he answered, "Oh yeah, I have a picture too; a picture of a Foo Fighter. It's just a picture I printed from my computer, but it's pretty famous."

He pulled out his binder of notes that he used for data gathering from out of his bag. He dug through his files. "Hmm, ah, here it is. This." Mixed in with a bundle of suspicious-looking spirit photos, he unfolded a wrinkled up picture on his desk.

Nishikubo and Hanamura leaned forward to see. It was a blurry and monochromatic picture. It was the kind that had to be explained in order for anyone to know what it was, like a typical UFO photograph.

Nishikubo was the first to respond. "What is this? Which side is up?"

"Like this." Asaba rearranged the picture so that Nishikubo could see it properly from where he was standing. "This picture floated around on the Internet around the beginning of the year, and caused a bit of a stir. This part is the ground, this part is the sky, and this fuzzy shadow right in the middle is the Foo Fighter. The photographer is unknown."

"And right here is the Yeti⁵ and over there is Nessie⁶, right?"

Hanamura was mocking the picture, but surprisingly, Nishikubo stared intently at it. Pointing at the shadow of the Foo Fighter, he asked, "Are these the illuminations from the wingtip lights?"

"No idea," Asaba replied, tilting his head to the side. "I think that this was probably taken on the west side of apron⁷ number four, not too far from the section of the mountains where the President and I were at. There was a video that also circulated around the Internet with this image file, but that was way blurrier than this one and I couldn't tell what was going on at all."

"Isn't this just an airplane? You can't explain anything with such a blurry photograph like this in the first place."

"Well, for sure, putting aside stuff like UFO technology, I wouldn't be surprised at all if they were doing something like testing newly developed secret weapons. War is imminent, after all."

War is imminent.

That phrase was like a type of running joke to Asaba's generation. Even before he was born, people had said, "Anytime now." But even so, all that ever happened on the news was repeated skirmishes, and the "full blown war" never began, even after all this time.

"War won't happen," Hanamura said.

"Won't it?" Asaba replied.

"But haven't airstrikes on the North started again recently? Some college professor or something on the news this morning was saying that this time it's serious," Nishikubo said.

Hanamura, however, completely blew it off. "Don't they always say that? You know, if war really never breaks out we're all going to look like huge idiots. We even turned the school into a shelter and run disaster drills once every month."

"Asaba." Asaba, Nishikubo, and Hanamura all looked up at the same time. It was Akiho.

All Akiho said was, "Come here a minute," and dragged Asaba towards her desk. Within the class, Sudou Akiho was known for being a violent girl, so even Hanamura didn't dare to make any jokes openly.

"Why were you late today?"

"I wasn't. I barely made it."

"Walking into the classroom at the same time Kawaguchi does is basically the same as being late. You were easy prey," Akiho said. She pulled out a stack of papers fastened together with a paperclip from her bag and shoved it into Asaba's arms.

"What's this?"

"Wha-Don't look at it here! Hurry up and put it away somewhere."

Asaba was shocked. It was a photocopy of all of the summer homework. Asaba chuckled shamefully, "This looks like it'll score pretty high."

"Naturally. I'm sure you already know, but don't copy it all exactly."

"Um,"

Right when he was about to thank her, she whispered angrily at him, “Hurry up and put it away!” Asaba hastily stuffed the bundle of papers down his collar into his shirt. Akiho stared at Asaba, surprised, “You’re going to hide it in there?”

“Oh yeah.” At that moment, Asaba suddenly remembered something important. There was something he needed to ask Akiho.

“What?”

“Hey, there’s something I want to ask you.”

“Yeah, and?”

“This might sound kind of weird, but about the school swimsuits the girls at our school wear—” Akiho’s eyes darkened instantly. Asaba braced himself and continued. “They have like, shoulder straps I think, with white lines on the edges around them, right?”

“That’s extremely detailed. Why do you know something like that?” Akiho glared intensely at Asaba. “You weren’t peeping during the girls’ swimming classes were yo—”

“No way. There are plenty of girls swimming in school swimsuits if you go to the city pool, right?”

Akiho stared at Asaba suspiciously, but she was convinced for the time being. “And?”

“They have name tags on them, right? On the front and back. Kind of like the ones on the short-sleeved gym clothes. Can you remove those easily?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, are they attached by Velcro or by snap fasteners so you can remove them easily if you felt like it? Or are they sewn on?”

Akiho thought over it briefly. “I’m pretty sure they’re usually sewn on. There’d be no point if you could just remove them. Why are you asking something like that?”

It was a logical conclusion, but it didn’t reveal anything to him. That girl looked like she was about the same age as him. Apparently, the school swimsuit she was wearing was a school-designated one. However, all schools probably had

similarly designed swimsuits. Regardless of whether or not she had a nametag, it was possible that for some reason she had gotten a new swimsuit and it just so happened that the nametag wasn't attached that night. He couldn't say anything with certainty.

The clock tower's bell rang. Second period was beginning.

"Thanks."

He wasn't thanking her for the copy of the homework; he was thanking her for answering his question. He returned to his desk, deep in thought. Naturally, Nishikubo cast a quick glance at Asaba from the corner of his eyes, and Hanamura pestered him with, "Hey, what were you guys talking about?" But Asaba barely heard a thing, and Hanamura quickly gave up. Everybody around him began to take their seats, unenthusiastic about the end of passing period.

Staring at a single point on his desk, Asaba began to contemplate. "Who on Earth was that girl? 'You leave first. The guys outside won't hurt you.' That's what the mystery man who appeared at the pool said. And I followed obediently. I still feel the uncanny aura, the suspense, and the fear from that moment. But those feelings slowly faded as time went by. Why didn't I say what I wanted to at that time?" Those were the kinds of regrets that he should have been immediately wracked with.

But he was thinking about something else. "I left that girl with the man by the poolside, and exited outside the locker room. That much is fact. Outside there were large white vans and men dressed in black clothing. I think there were five or six vans, and ten or twenty men dressed in black. One of the men approached me and offered, 'If you'd like I can take you close to home by car.' He spoke politely. 'I apologize for not being able to explain anything to you, but we'd like to get you out of here as quickly as possible, so this van would be most convenient.'"

"I obediently followed the men dressed in black too. At that time, I forgot that I had parked my bike at the video shop. Being urged along, I got into one of the vans parked nearby. I was wearing only a pair of soaked short-shorts, holding my bag, and carrying my shoes in one hand. After the car began moving, I remember taking a t-shirt out of my bag and putting it on."

His memory suddenly broke off after that.

“I have absolutely no idea what happened. Before I realized it, I was sitting alone on the bench at the bus station nearby home. I was dressed properly in my clothes. The bike that was supposed to be parked at the video shop was right next to me, tied to the bench leg with a chain lock. The bus station’s clock indicated that it was 2:10 A.M.”

“I can calmly recall all of this right now, but at that moment I was absolutely frightened to tears. I realized how terrifying it was. It was no joking matter. Memory loss wasn’t calm and carefree or romantic like it was made out to be on TV and manga. I couldn’t anticipate how utterly terrifying a mere few blank hours could be. I have no idea what I did, and it was practically like I couldn’t take responsibility for any of my actions. I have no idea at all what I did to anyone, or what anyone did to me.”

“I was so scared that I couldn’t remember the combination for the lock right away. I desperately pedaled home. It was truly horrifying.”

“Hey! You guys over there, hurry up and take your seats!” Class President Nakagomi yelled.

A pair of boys at the back of the classroom who had been throwing a rubber ball at each other grudgingly returned to their seats, grumbling and complaining, “Man, what a pain in the ass.” “If times hadn’t changed, she’d be the type that’d be the first to say ‘For the Homeland.’”

Asaba continued to stare at a single point on his desk and contemplate. “What if everything that happened last night was all a dream? Frankly, it kind of feels that way. Everything was just so absurd: the girl I met by the pool at night and the silver metallic spheres embedded in her wrists; the mystery man and the men in black. Everybody other than myself was unidentifiable. There was zero physical evidence. And to top it all off, after I was put into the van my memory was cut off.”

“Even if I talked to someone, I don’t think I could ever get them to believe me. Even I wouldn’t believe it if someone told me this story. First of all, there’s no way that a memory with holes in it has any credibility at all, so even if I did experience something surreal at the pool, I have no reason to insist that it was

even a ‘surreal incident’ at all. I had some type of memory distortion, and I came back to my senses on the bench at the bus station nearby home. Only those two facts were reality, and the chain of events that began after I snuck into the pool all seem like they could have been a dream. There was the mental and physical exhaustion caused by the mountain camp, and the stress of summer vacation ending and my untouched homework. It seems possible that all of that twisted my mind and was the cause of my memory distortion and my escapist dream.”

“That was all a dream. Thinking about it like that puts my mind at ease. It’s far better than thinking that something insane happened to me.”

However, there was another side of him that refused to be content with that peace of mind. “You spineless bastard, cut it out and open your eyes!” his other self screamed. “Mental and physical exhaustion and stress, huh? I see how it is. If it’s like that, no matter what you see or hear, it can’t be helped, huh? Damn, this convenient explanation works for everything. Modern rationalism is the miracle trash bin that every household invariably possesses. So, did you plan on explaining something away? Alright, listen up. All you’re trying to do is pretend that nothing ever happened because you gave in to the fear of having lost a portion of your memory. ‘It wasn’t anything worth worrying over.’ You want to believe that so badly that, regardless of the presence of objectivity or repeatability, you dragged out this “psychological explanation” that’s basically the equivalent of fortune telling or folk remedies. All you’re trying to do is reconstruct a homemade everyday life.”

“That’s the very thing they’re aiming for. Don’t be fooled by it. ‘That was all a dream.’ You lose if you think like that,” his other self continued.

His mouth twisted into a wry smile. “There must be something wrong with me. Who in the world is ‘they?’ When did this turn into something about ‘winning or losing?’ I practically sound like a fanatic believer of supernatural phenomena.”

But still, nonetheless.

Even now, no matter what, he couldn’t imagine that everything was a dream. The image of the ripples extending across the black surface of the water, like radar waves, lapping against the edge of the pool; the image of the girl wearing her swimming cap so earnestly; the crimson image from her nosebleed that

stained the towel; the sound of her mysterious voice that sounded as if she was speaking in a foreign language no matter what she said; the image of her slightly delighted smile when she swam 15 meters with the kickboard; the image of her brown eyes that peered at him from less than an inch away, their noses almost touching; the image of the silver spheres glittering on her wrists.

No matter how hard logic and reason attempted to disclaim it, his emotions wouldn't accept denial.

"Who in the world was that girl?" He wanted to know. He didn't even know what he'd do once he found out, or whether or not he even wanted to meet her again.

But regardless, even now, he wanted to believe that "Iriya" was there.

"Rise." The sliding door at the entrance of the classroom, which didn't very slide well, gave off a harsh grating noise as it opened.

Before he'd realized what was going on, everybody in the class had risen and paid their respects at the Class President's order. Asaba was the only one sitting down, and by the time he hastily tried to stand up, everybody was already sitting down.

Math teacher Iizuka walked up to the platform, tottering like he had just crawled out of an open grave. Tossing his textbook onto his desk, he spoke in a voice that a mummy would have if it tried to communicate. "Uhhhhhhhh..." That didn't mean that he was finally starting. He was trying to remember where he last left off in the previous class. Normally, he'd go, "Uhhhhhhhhhh... alright then," but today, he suddenly stopped. Half of the class sitting on the side near the hallway heard a discrete knock, and the other half on the side near the window definitely thought that Iizuka had suddenly died.

The door opened delicately, and 35-year-old bachelor and homeroom teacher Kawaguchi Taizou's face peeked in. "Iizuka-sensei, may I have a moment?"

Iizuka responded with a few low sounds. "Oohh." "Aahh."

Asaba sighed softly. It might have been because he was a member of the Newspaper Club and they clashed often, or maybe they just didn't get along since birth, but Asaba just couldn't bring himself to like his homeroom teacher

Kawaguchi. Asaba couldn't stand looking at his face, and he immediately shifted his gaze outside through an open window on the left.

It was a view from the second story of Sonohara Middle School's main building on the side of the main gate. There wasn't really anything interesting out there. There was a row of sakura trees about as aged as the school building itself, a stone monument with a progressive school motto engraved upon it, another stone monument with a traditionalist school song engraved upon it, and the roof of the main entrance of the school building painted over by lines of old paint. The chirping of buried cicadas rose to the forefront of his consciousness as background noise. The rays of the summer sun didn't cast a single shadow anywhere. The parking spaces paved with gravel were barren. A familiar white van shimmered in the heat.

His body froze.

That man was there. That man was standing next to the white van. The man who appeared by the poolside, who told the story of the angry old janitor, and who gave off an exhausted aura like an old man even though he was young.

He wore a suit like last night, slung his jacket over his shoulder like last night, and wore the tie that he wasn't wearing last night. He was shading his eyes with his hand and looking up at the school building. The man then immediately noticed Asaba, and made an expression that said, "Looks like I ran into someone unexpected." He gave Asaba a wide grin like last night, and waved his arm from right to left only once.

Kawaguchi was saying something. His voice automatically came flowing into Asaba's ears. "Aahh, due to certain circumstances, she was unable to make it to homeroom, but borrowing a bit of Iizuka-sensei's time here—"

The chirping of the cicadas gradually became louder.

It wasn't something as simple as a premonition.

Asaba slowly, slowly, slowly turned around and faced the classroom.

Iriya Kana.

That's what was written in beautiful characters on the blackboard.

That girl was standing on the platform. She stood there wearing a virtually brand new summer uniform, holding a spotlessly polished bag like a first year student, wearing a pair of indoor shoes that had never seen the inside of a shoe locker, and wearing wrist bands on both of her wrists.

The chirping of the cicadas grew louder and louder.

Kawaguchi was saying something. Kawaguchi's mouth was moving, as if to say, "I'd like to introduce a new transfer student." But Asaba could no longer hear those words. He couldn't hear the stir throughout the classroom either. Despite that, he distinctly heard that girl's voice; her awkward voice that sounded like she was speaking her first words since she was born.

"My name is Iriya Kana."

"Definitely a fake name," he thought to himself somewhere in his mind.

There were cicadas in his head now.

She stated her name, and bowed with a motion that felt like she had practiced countless times to somehow reach this point.

The girl then stared intently at Asaba, who was sitting by the window and still unable to move a muscle.

"If I think about it, it's perfectly obvious," Asaba thought to himself. Just because summer vacation ended, didn't mean that summer itself ended at the same time. His summer would continue on for a while longer.

It was the summer of UFOs.

TL Notes:

1. Passing period: text in Japanese is 休憩時間. In middle school / high school there is a period of usually 5-10 minutes between each period for students to get their other books or rest before the next class begins. In America, it is commonly referred to as passing period. <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=passing%20period>
2. 軽トラ: light truck. <http://www.asahi-net.or.jp/~bq9t-tkhm/g->

[image_4wd/IMG_2597.jpg](#)

3: JASDF: Japan Air Self-Defense Force. // USAF: United States Air Force

4. Area Sonohara is probably a reference to [Area 51](#), a large military airfield that is the subject of many conspiracy theories.

5. [Yeti](#): The Abominable Snowman. Like a snow version of Bigfoot.

6. [Nessie](#): The Loch Ness Monster

7. [Apron](#): the area of an airport where aircraft are parked, unloaded or loaded, refueled, or boarded.

2-1

Chapter 2: Love Letter

2-1

“It’s so obvious,” Asaba thought to himself.

“She’s an alien. The President was right, after all. Sonohara Base is a UFO base. It’s a place where UFOs from the outer reaches of space come to land in secret. Aliens and government bigwigs are talking at the same table. No doubt the government bigwigs are hell-bent on getting their hands on advanced alien technology, in order to prepare for the impending outbreak of war. However, the aliens respond, in a voice that sounds as if they had inhaled helium gas, with something like, ‘The moment humanity abandons war and achieves world peace, all of our technology will be provided to you, and Earth will be welcomed as a member of the galactic community.’ It’s the same in every book. For some reason aliens really care about peace on Earth. No doubt the aliens are having that very same conversation with the bigwigs up North too. That’s also the reason why we always seem to be on the brink of war, and yet it never comes. For both sides, alien technology holds the possibility of becoming their decisive ace in the hole. Both sides are thinking that if they’re going to start a conflict, then they’ll do it after getting the technology. After a drawn-out deadlock, the aliens have finally made their move. They’ve dispatched countless agents disguised as humans to every possible corner of human society. They have one mission: to confirm directly with their own eyes humanity’s true nature. Is humanity a peace loving and intelligent race? Or is it a barbaric race completely absorbed in killing one another? If the result of the investigation turns out to be the latter, then Earth will instantly be smashed into atoms by the UFO’s super weapon. That’s definitely it. That girl, introducing herself as Iriya, is also one of those agents.

The one in charge of ‘middle school students.’”

It was like he couldn’t remember a thing that went on during class.

The second period bell rang, Iizuka returned to the graveyard, and the mess of numbers on the board was wiped away by the blackboard eraser. However, Asaba was unable to pull himself from his swamp of thoughts. He stared at the white nothingness of his blank notebook, which he had opened but ended up not writing a single letter in. Carelessly holding his cheap mechanical pencil, he remained unable to move. Alone, Asaba felt removed from passing period and from reality. He was glued to his chair beside the window, like a poorly made collage. No matter what he did, he couldn't erase the words, "Iriya Kana," that were now engraved upon the blackboard of his mind.

"Hey, Asaba!" Someone poked his forehead. Hanamura appeared before him. Sitting backwards in his chair, he overdramatically leaned forward and giggled, peering at Asaba's face from below. "What's with you, spacing out like that? Could it be that? Are you interested in the new transfer student?"

Well, Asaba couldn't really say that he was entirely wrong. But it wasn't the type of interest that Hanamura was thinking of. "S-Shut up."

Nishikubo suddenly placed his hands on Asaba's shoulders. "Well, whatever you do, don't get too carried away. You'll get stabbed by Sudou if you do something like invite her to the Newspaper Club."

Asaba became even more flustered. Shaking himself loose from Nishikubo's hands, Asaba responded, "A-Akiho isn't—"

Hanamura propped up his chin with his hands. Grinning faintly, he eyed the back of the room with a lewd expression. "Nah, no way. She's not the Newspaper Club type, let alone the 'Sonohara Radio Wave' type."

Nishikubo followed Hanamura's gaze, and muttered, "Well, I guess so."

Asaba secretly summoned up courage from the depths of his stomach. He raised his face, and slowly turned around to the back of the classroom.

There she was.

He looked to the far end of the classroom, to the second seat from the side facing the hallway. Next to that seat, there was a "third seat from the side facing the hallway" that didn't exist up until just an hour ago. Iriya was sitting there. She was neither a dream nor an illusion. She was just sitting there. She wasn't

doing anything. There wasn't anything on her desk, yet she stared intently at it, hardly blinking at all. She had an aura of an animal that provided no resistance upon being captured, yet never became accustomed to its captors.

"My name is Iriya Kana."

"Ahh, everyone, listen to this surprising story. Iriya-kun is a returnee student¹," 35-year-old bachelor Kawaguchi Taizou stated, standing next to Iriya. In a flat tone of voice that sounded like he was performing an autopsy, Kawaguchi provided a thorough explanation of Iriya's past. He explained how her parents had already passed away, how she was living together with her brother who worked with the JASDF, how because of that she lived in an overseas military base for an extended period, how she took the opportunity to return to Japan when her brother transferred to Sonohara, and how they currently live in the residential zone in Sonohara Base. "Oh, that's right, I forgot. There's no desk for her. Hey, class monitor, run down to the supply room and bring back a chair and a desk. Ahh, and that's how it is, so there are things that Iriya-kun will still not be used to in a Japanese school. I'd like for everyone to give her plenty of advice and encouragement. Understood?"

Asaba didn't understand.

Kawaguchi's explanation didn't sound like a complete lie to Asaba. However, his explanation didn't fit at all with the incident last night at the pool. The terribly noisy sirens of the patrol cars at the beginning, the image of Iriya's slender shoulders as she gazed intently at the surface of the water, the appearance of the mysterious man who introduced himself as her brother, the group of men dressed in black surrounding the pool, the gap in his memory concerning what happened after that,

And, now hidden by wristbands, those silver—

'You want to lick it?'

"I wonder if electricity tastes like anything when you lick it."

Hanamura and Nishikubo glanced at each other after hearing Asaba's

mumbling, and responded at the same time, “Haah?” “Huh? Ah, umm...”

From behind, with both hands, Nishikubo pushed open Asaba’s hair where it was parted. “Yo, you sure your brain didn’t get fried too while you were up there in the mountains?”

Shaking himself loose from Nishikubo’s hands, he answered, “Knock it off, you idiot.”

At that moment, Hanamura said, “Whoa, check it out. What class are those guys from? Are rumors spreading around already?”

A group of male students from some other class were peeking in from the entrance of the classroom. They were eyeing Iriya intensely with longing eyes.

Hanamura snickered, “They look like they had the wind knocked out of their sails.”

Upon hearing that, Nishikubo suddenly remembered something. “I see, so that’s what it was. I just remembered. Those guys are probably from Class 1.”

Asaba and Hanamura both had puzzled expressions.

“I mean, they really did have the wind knocked out of their sails. Do you guys know this guy named Mogami from Class 1? I’m a friend of his.”

Asaba shook his head. Hanamura answered, “Don’t know him.”

Nishikubo continued quickly, “Before summer vacation he was bragging about it. About how there would be a girl transfer student coming in after break ended.”

Hanamura reacted before Asaba did, and said, “Wait. So Iriya was actually supposed to be transferred into Class 1?”

“Probably. Just earlier, Kawaguchi didn’t have her desk ready and had to send the class monitor to go get one. If they really did plan on having her transfer into this class, don’t you think they’d normally prepare at least a desk in advance? There’s definitely some kind of reason that caused them to change their plans.”

“What kind of reason?”

“How should I know that?”

‘Some kind of reason.’ Those four simple words felt incredibly heavy to Asaba right then. His head hung under the immense weight, and again, horrifying notions planted themselves within his mind. A sickening sweat silently crept down the middle of his back.

“Maybe the reason was the pool incident last night, after all,” Asaba thought to himself. “If that were the case, then maybe I was designated as Iriya’s ‘number one vital research subject’ because I was ‘the first middle school student that she met,’ or something like that. Every single move I make might control the fate of humanity. Oh man, what should I do? If they have to do research, I wish they’d do it on someone else. On someone like Nishikubo. Maybe not on Hanamura though. If the President were chosen to be the research subject, humanity would be annihilated in less than five seconds.”

Nishikubo and Hanamura, ignoring Asaba’s plight, stared at Iriya and commented, “She’s kind of a strange girl.”

“She’s cute, so it’s no problem.”

“Maybe she’s not too good at speaking Japanese.”

“She’s cute, so it’s no problem.”

“W-Whoa. Hey, check it out. They’re going for a full frontal assault. As expected of the Class Rep-sama.”

Asaba couldn’t ignore what was going on. Instinctively turning around, he saw an allied fleet of four friendly girls, led by a flagship commanded by Nakagomi Makiko, Class Representative of Class 2-4, boldly advancing towards “Iriya Island” through the sea of desks, chairs, and whispers. Iriya keenly picked up on the emergence of the “enemies.” She suddenly raised her head when they broke past the three desks between her and them, and fixed her gaze directly upon Nakagomi, with a completely unreadable expression. Yet despite that, Nakagomi didn’t falter. Everyone around them followed the transpiring events from the corner of their eye, lowering their voices as to not miss a moment of the conversation. The din of passing period melted from the classroom. Asaba looked on apprehensively, mumbling to himself, “Cut it out, Nakagomi. What do you think you’re doing to our planet Earth?”

Nakagomi stood in front of Iriya. She began to speak, “U-Um.” She stalled.

Nakagomi quietly took a deep breath, and put on a smile that felt considerably forced. “I’m Nakagomi Makiko. I’m the Class Rep, so if there’s anything you’re unsure of, feel free to ask me.”

Iriya remained completely silent.

Even Nakagomi wavered. The other three girls frantically tried to follow up. In a makeshift attempt to recover, they began introducing themselves one after the other and attacked in waves. “Where did you used to live?” “I’m really bad with English. Can you teach me?” “I also transferred here when I was in elementary school.” “Is your brother a cool guy?”

Iriya cast her eyes downward.

It was as if seeing that fanned the feelings of “we need to do something” within Nakagomi’s group, and even more words flew forth in rapid succession. Despite that, Iriya remained reticent. The four of them only talking to Iriya left long moments of silence where they didn’t know what to do, so they soon began conversations among themselves, occasionally turning to Iriya to ask her, “Right?” But every time they asked her, Iriya fled deeper and deeper into the trenches. Nakagomi’s group, in pursuing her, soon lost sight of when to quit. It felt like an *eternity*. But in reality, the time slowly ticking by was about the same length as going to the bathroom and coming back. Much like the feeling in the pit of your stomach when you watch something cringeworthy, Asaba felt like watching this was causing his hair to turn completely white.

Finally, Iriya raised her face.

The Nakagomi group’s conversations ceased. The entire classroom was very conspicuously observing Iriya’s next actions. Iriya shrank from the silence and intense stares. Iriya’s eyes were like that of a drowning child, and she desperately searched around the classroom. Before long, her eyes stopped when she found the seat by the window.

The classroom began to stir.

It was obvious to the entire class.

Iriya was clearly staring at Asaba, her eyes practically begging for help.

“Hey,” Hanamura muttered quietly. Nishikubo looked at Asaba from the corner

of his eye.

But Asaba remained silent. Putting down the mechanical pencil that he had been holding since second period, he quietly pulled out his chair and slowly stood up. Standing right in the middle of all of the attention that had shifted to him from Iriya, Asaba declared, to no one in particular,

“I have to go to the bathroom.”



TL Notes

- 1. 帰国子女: person who has returned to his/her home country after spending time overseas.

Chapter 2: Love Letter

2-2

Since he said he would, he really did go to the bathroom.

Asaba holed up in the bathroom stall, and even though nobody could see him in there, he properly lowered his pants and underwear and sat down on the toilet seat. It looked as though Asaba wanted to minimize the lie he had told as much as possible.

And so, with his butt exposed, he sat there and worried. At about a ratio of 9:1, Asaba mostly felt ashamed, but also felt annoyed at Iriya.

However, not too long after he began to worry, the bell signifying the start of third period rang. Asaba sighed deeply, pulled up his pants that didn't need to be lowered, flushed the toilet that didn't need to be flushed, washed his hands that didn't need to be washed, and staggered out of the bathroom.

"You're a huge coward." Akiho ambushed Asaba as he came out.

"W-What are you talking about?" Asaba bluffed. Thinking that it was none of her business, he felt like asking her, "Well, what would you have done then?" But Akiho was making a rather menacing face, so he decided not to say anything unnecessary. Instead, he said, "The bell rang. We should get back to class."

Akiho paid absolutely no attention to what Asaba said. "Do you know her?"

"No, it's not like that." Beyond that, his voice choked up so badly that he felt like he couldn't breathe.

"Well, what was that then?"

In any case, he had to escape Akiho's interrogation. "I'm telling you, I really don't know her. I spent my entire summer vacation up in the mountains with the President, and didn't Kawaguchi say that she just recently came back from a foreign country?"

Akiho glared directly at Asaba suspiciously, and suddenly declared, “It was at the pool, wasn’t it?”

Asaba felt as if his heart would leap out of his mouth.

“You did ask me something about school swimsuits before first period, Asaba. Besides, unlike the President, you did go home from time to time during the mountain trip. That means that you met her at the city pool or something. That’s why her swimsuit didn’t have a nametag on it yet. Ohhhh. I see how it is. Hmmm?”

“Well, I guess it’s fine if Akiho believes that,” Asaba thought.

Akiho’s grim expression eased up a little, probably because her suspicions had been somewhat alleviated for the time being. “Is she bad with Japanese? Have you talked to her?”

She was saying something similar to what Nishikubo had said. Given Iriya’s introverted nature, and the explanation of her being a returnee student, it would seem that everyone was thinking the same thing.

Asaba’s head was swimming.

“No idea.”

His legs buckled.

“What are you talking about? Answer properly. You at least talked to her, didn’t you? When yo— Hey, Asaba, are you feeling okay? Your face is as pale as a ghost.”

It came on suddenly.

Asaba was struck by an intense bout of dizziness, and felt like the world had flipped upside down. In an instant, he was no longer able to remain standing. He sank into a crouch. He felt extremely ill. The feeling was like a combination of carsickness and the stomach flu. It took everything he had to withstand the onslaught of nausea.

“Are you alright!? Hey Asaba, what’s wrong!?”

Akiho was causing a huge commotion. Right outside of his severely narrowed field of vision, he could tell that students walking through the hallway had

stopped in surprise. 'Don't yell so loud, you're so embarrassing,' Asaba briefly thought in his mind; but he didn't even have the luxury of putting that into words. His face was covered in a cold sweat.

He took several deep breaths.

Then, about as suddenly as it had started, the nausea quickly faded away. He somehow managed to stand up. Wiping the sweat from his brow, he was surprised by how cold his forehead was. The bout of dizziness did leave quite a lasting effect, but still, he felt much better.

"I'm fine now," Asaba said.

However, from where Akiho was standing, Asaba's face had gone beyond just being pale, and was now deathly white. Akiho grabbed Asaba's hand. "No you're not! Let's go to the nurse's office! I'll come with you!"

"She's right. I should probably head to the nurse's office," Asaba thought. "But still, it's not so bad that I need to have her accompany me."

"I can go by myself. Class is starting, go back to the classroom."

Akiho paid absolutely no attention to what Asaba said. Dragging Asaba by the hand, she began to walk briskly.

Chapter 2: Love Letter

2-3

Since long ago, Sonohara Middle School's hallways were traditionally a mess. Empty boxes of teaching materials were piled high along the wall, mops and buckets that couldn't be stuffed into lockers lined the hallways, and "Club Recruitment" posters that were never taken down rustled and beckoned whenever someone walked by. Beyond that was the entrance to the nurse's office, right before the corridor leading to the gym. There was a signboard with the logo "Seishu – Tennouzan" sticking out, so you could tell where it was right away. It was the remnants of a matchmaking pub that the girls basketball club had done during last year's school festival. A nameplate hung to the side of the door, bearing the words, "Fire Prevention Assistant Supervisor – Shiina Mayumi."

Akiho shoved open the door and said, "Excuse me." She ran into the nurse's office dragging Asaba's hand as he staggered along, and nearly collided head-on with three male students who were right on the other side of the door.

"Go on, get going. The next class is starting soon, get out of here." Shiina Mayumi was shoving the three boys' backs with both hands.

Funatsu, the boy in the center of the three, was in the same class as Asaba last year. He noticed Asaba, and right after he said, "Yo," opened his eyes wide in surprise. "What's with your face, dude?"

"Does my face really look that bad still?" Asaba wondered.

After taking one look at Asaba's face, Shiina Mayumi said, "Oh dear, this one doesn't look like he's faking it."

Funatsu and his friends smiled sheepishly and protested, "Whoa, that's so mean. We're sick too, you know."

But Shiina Mayumi was having none of it, and fired back, "Shut up and get out

already, you damn fakers. Idiots.” She kicked the three of them out into the hallway in the blink of an eye, and slammed the door shut with her back. They did pretty much the same thing every passing period, so she was quite used to it.

The majority of Sonohara Middle School students regarded Shiina Mayumi as “an amazing beauty if you look closely.” In addition to never using makeup, she always wore the same white doctor’s coat, so she never stood out. And on top of that, she used extremely vulgar language, and calmly said things like, “ass” and “dick.” About a month before summer vacation began, she came to this school as a substitute for Kurobe-sensei, who had to go on extended medical leave. Male and female students alike all continued to tell her, “If only you’d pretty yourself up a little bit more,” but the actual person herself didn’t care at all. Day after day, she happily shuffled around in her slippers, with her hands stuffed in her white doctor’s coat pockets.

“Um—” Right when Akiho opened her mouth to speak, Shiina Mayumi suddenly interrupted her in a loud voice, and shouted, “Wait! Let me guess this one.” She furrowed her eyebrows and stared intently at Asaba’s pale face. She carefully deliberated for 15 seconds, nodded like she was 100% confident, pointed at Asaba and bluntly declared, “You’re huffing paint thinner.”

“N-No!” Akiho yelled. She glanced at Asaba from the corner of her eye. “She’s wrong, right?”

“Right.” He decided that he’d explain it himself, and said, “Um, earlier I suddenly felt sick, like I’d throw up or something.”

Akiho suddenly cut in, “It really was all of a sudden, and his face was even paler than it is right now.”

Shiina Mayumi remained calm. She had Asaba sit down on a stool, and sat down on a folding chair across from it. “You’re not looking too good right now, either. Did you have a proper breakfast?”

Asaba nodded. “But I don’t feel nauseous anymore, and I feel much better.”

“It might be better if you sleep a little. I’ll inform your teacher, so what’s your name and class?”

Before Asaba could even open his mouth, Akiho answered, “Asaba Naoyuki,

Class 2-4.”

Shiina Mayumi pulled a ballpoint pen from her breast pocket and flipped the pages on the student register, muttering “Asaba from 2-4.” She abruptly furrowed her eyebrows and muttered, “Asaba?” All of a sudden, completely out of the blue, “Noo waayy, Asaba-kun!? *You’re* Asaba-kun!? Asaba-kun from Class 2-4!?” She shouted in such a loud voice that Asaba and Akiho instinctively bent back.

“Oooooohhhhh~~, I seeee how it is~~,” Shiina Mayumi said, coming to some kind of a conclusion on her own. She leaned forward with such open curiosity that Asaba instinctively shrunk back on his seat. “Oooooohhhhh~~, I see, I see. So yooouu’re Asaba-kun, huuhh? Hmmmmmm~?” She grinned with delight as she spoke. Suddenly, she stopped grinning and reverted back to being serious, like she had remembered something important. “That means you’re *that* Asaba-kun, right!? Do you feel sick!? Are you okay!?”

“What the hell’s wrong with this person,” Asaba thought to himself.

All Asaba could do was sit there in utter shock, but Akiho, upon seeing Shiina Mayumi work herself into a panic, suddenly became worried. “U-Um, is there something wrong?”

“Huh? Ah, nonono, it’s nothing, nothing at all. Uhh, right, well, I’ll take care of Asaba so you return to your classroom. Class already started. ‘Kay?” The techniques that Shiina Mayumi refined day after day were very effective. She chased Akiho out of the nurse’s office, pushing her backside with both hands. Akiho looked like she still wanted to say something.

She slammed the door shut and turned around. She had a grim expression; completely opposite of what it was earlier. “Just to make sure, I’m going to ask you one more time. You’re Asaba Naoyuki-kun, Sonohara Middle School, Class 2-4, #1 on the attendance list. Is that correct?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

Asaba became worried from the intense seriousness of her tone of voice. Shiina Mayumi bit her lip and looked up at the ceiling. She thought about something carefully, and questioned Asaba further. “You suddenly felt ill and nauseated, right?”

“Right.”

Shiina-sensei plopped herself down across from Asaba. She roughly took his pulse, and turned his eyelids over and examined them. She exhaled deeply from her nose, and straightened her back. “Okay then, I’m going to perform a quick examination. I’m going to ask you a few questions, and I’d like for you to answer them. It’s a bit different from a regular inspection, but it’s the same in that the results won’t be correct if you don’t answer truthfully. Understood?”

Asaba nodded.

The first question went, “What month and day is today?”

The question was so abrupt that Asaba was unable to answer. Shiina Mayumi’s stare hastened Asaba’s anxiety. While he was thinking about how unfair it was that he was caught off guard, time marched on one second at a time. “Ah, um, today is, uh, the first day of second semester, so September 1st.” He finally answered after taking ten seconds.

Before he could even take a breath, the next question came flying at him. “Do you have any chronic illnesses?”

“Huh? Ah, no. No I don’t.”

“So you don’t regularly take any medication?”

“Umm, I sometimes take vitamin C. The powder kind. My dad likes those.”

“C, as in ascorbic acid?”

“Aahh, um, I’m not too sure.”

“What’s $17 + 26$?”

He was caught off guard again, so it took him 20 seconds this time. “Thir-no wait, forty. 43? U-um, can we maybe start all over from the beginni—“

“Do you have any allergies?”

“Huh? No, none, I think.”

“State the school principal’s name.”

“Murayama Kanji.” He was somehow able to answer instantly this time.

Before he even had time to feel good about himself, “When you became ill, didn’t you suffer from severe dizziness?”

“Uh, right.”

“Did your face, arms and legs get the chills?”

“They did. I feel fine now, though.”

And then,

“What day was June 24th?”

Chapter 2: Love Letter

2-4

“This definitely has to be a test that examines the patient’s nerves or some kind of condition,” Asaba thought. “In order to make me lose track of what the real questions are, she’s mixing in a bunch of dummy questions. Or maybe there aren’t any real or dummy questions, and she just gives me random questions one after the other, to try to get me to think. Maybe whatever I answer doesn’t actually matter at all, and what’s important is what kind of reaction I have when I answer. Maybe my hand shakes or my eyes swim without me even realizing it.”

But, putting that aside for the moment, “Does that question absolutely have to be June 24th?” Asaba asked.

He wasn’t returned with an answer, but rather with a question. “When you became ill, did your heart rate increase?”

“Um, I don’t believe so.”

“Globular plasma, a mirage, or a weather balloon. If you were to take a picture of one, which would you pick?”

“Um—”

“Mantell. Chiles-Whitted. What comes next?”

It sounded familiar. The answer came tumbling out from inside of his head. There were three major incidents in the history of UFO sightings. Captain Mantell’s crash, the Chiles-Whitted encounter. “The third would be the Gorman UFO dogfight,” he thought to himself.

“When you became ill, did your vision go white, or did you see flickering lights?”

“No.”

“Who’s been standing behind you this entire time?”

Asaba couldn't move a muscle.

"Any visual or auditory hallucinations? You haven't had anything like seeing your hands with seven fingers, or hearing voices talking about removing your organs? Are you familiar with the term Adamski helix spinal cord receptors?"

Cicadas were chirping outside of the nurse's office.

"What the hell's wrong with this person?" Asaba thought.

Outside of the window, the overflowing summer sunlight seemed to melt into white the contours of everything it came into contact with.

The nurse's office was poorly lit, almost unnaturally cool, and had the smell of aged medicine faintly wafting through the air. The window curtains silently filled with wind and fluttered like ghosts. The eye-catching red crosses scattered about were probably traps in order to dispel the fears of its victims. Posters expounding the dangers of smoking, colored pictures of lungs covered in cancerous growths, tiled walls reminiscent of operating rooms, beds that lacked any semblance of warmth, poisonous looking glass bottles lined up in cabinets, a large pair of heartless forceps, the distilled water of unapproachable medicine from the Orient, the ever unchanging white washbasin that took hundreds of people's vomit and excreta.

"Just think about it," he told himself. "Before anybody realized it, Kurobe-sensei was gone. Extended medical leave. Despite the fact that she was so lively. Then Shiina-sensei came to this school in her place, and instantly became a popular figure. This is all just an alien conspiracy. This place is just a sterile hell that smells like medicine. This person before me is actually just an alien minion. Shiina-sensei is indeed an amazing beauty, has an understanding personality, and is popular among both boys and girls, but when nobody's watching, her head splits wide open and tentacles come flailing out. At night, the people abducted by UFOs are brought here to this nurse's office, and Shiina-sensei shuffles around in her slippers, flailing her tentacles about, and performs terrifying human experiments sending fountains of blood flying around everywh —"

"Asaba-kun? Hey, Asaba-kun, what's wrong!? Do you feel sick again!?"

Asaba came to his senses not because he was being called out to in a loud

voice, or because his shoulders were being shaken; but rather, because he sensed the fragrance of Shiina Mayumi's shampoo, slightly wafting from her hair. Shiina Mayumi's face, which was already mere inches away, moved even closer to Asaba's, and she pressed her forehead up against his to check for a fever.

"I—! I'm okay, I feel fine. Um, I just spaced out a little." He immediately felt embarrassed, and hastily pulled his head away.

"You sure?" Shiina Mayumi was staring intently at Asaba. She had an extremely worried face. "Alright then, have a look at this."

She held a ballpoint pen in front of Asaba's eyes. The pen's body was made of clear plastic, with a blonde woman in a red swimsuit inside of it. The swimsuit was actually made of fine grains of red-colored sand. The sand slowly fell off of her before Asaba's eyes, and the blonde woman was soon completely naked. Asaba instinctively began to worry about the meaning of life.

"I'm going to move the ballpoint pen, so follow the tip with your eyes," she said. Shiina Mayumi moved the ballpoint pen up, down, left, and right, and carefully observed the movements of Asaba's eyes. Asaba tried to focus on the tip of the moving ballpoint pen, but before long, he felt a spreading oozing pain deep within his eyes. "Does your head hurt?"

Asaba nodded. Shiina Mayumi placed her right hand over Asaba's face to cover his eyes, placed her left hand on the back of his head, and moved his head so that it faced upwards. The pain in his eyes immediately disappeared.

"It doesn't hurt anymore, right?" She asked.

Asaba nodded. Shiina Mayumi looked up at the ceiling and contemplated something. She let out a small sigh, and, having reached some kind of a conclusion, fired herself up and rose from her chair.

"I think you'll be fine now, but you should lie down a little and rest your body. Oh, and drink this. It'll let you sleep better."

She spoke in a forceful tone of voice. He was given two yellow pills and a paper cup filled with barley tea. Asaba was pressured by the force of her words, and drank the medicine like he was told to. He slowly lay down on the bed and

covered himself with the blanket.

“Sleep easy,” she said. Shiina Mayumi forcefully closed the dividing curtain.

The instant he lay down, a feeling of drowsiness arose from the very core of his body. “I wonder if the medicine I just took is already taking effect,” he thought. “This feels way too fast. Or maybe I had already used up all of my energy without even knowing it.

Outside of the dividing curtain, Shiina Mayumi muttered, “Goddamnit.”

Slipper footsteps shuffled across the nurse’s office. There was the sound of her heavily lowering herself into her seat, the sound of her picking up the telephone receiver, and the sound of her aggressively punching in numbers with such force that the phone was rattling. As he was slowly being swept over by drowsiness, he followed every single sound he could hear outside of the curtain.

Shiina-sensei was trying to call someone.

He thought that she was calling the teacher to let him know that he was going to miss third period, but he was wrong. It was a long phone number. It was an outside line. Naturally, he had no idea where she was calling.

He felt so sleepy.

The person on the other line picked up immediately.

“Hello. This is backup Shiina. Right, from the nurse’s office. I understand. I don’t need you of all people telling me that. It’s fine, just put me through to Enomoto— Huh? Hello!?”

“Piece of shit hung up on me,” he heard Shiina Mayumi mutter. He heard the sound of the telephone receiver getting slammed down, the sound of buttons violently pressed again, and after a while, suddenly, “You piece of shit, don’t fuck with me, you’ve got huge balls hanging up on your superior, you bastard!! Just shut up, you’re so annoying. Hurry up and get me Eno— Aaaahhhh damnit!! It’s fine!! If anyone says anything to you, I’ll cover your ass, so get me Enomoto right now!!

At the bottom of a thick layer of drowsiness, Asaba was absent-mindedly surprised. “I wonder who Enomoto is.”

After quite a long time, “Enomoto” finally answered the phone.

“Do you know why I called?”

An extremely short pause.

“Wrong! You’re the only person that would do that in the middle of work, you moron!”

Another pause.

Shiina Mayumi scoffed. “Don’t play dumb. Okay, I’ll give you a hint. Who do you think is here right now?”

Another short pause.

“Stop fucking pretending like you don’t know! You used the mist cocktail on Asaba-kun last night, didn’t you!? Why the hell would you do something so dangerous like that!? There’s already been several people who took that and—“

Reacting to hearing his own name, Asaba’s consciousness, which had been sinking into the depths of slumber, slightly recovered.

“You can’t just say, ‘I didn’t know’ to a problem like this!! How did you plan to take responsibility if the worst case scenario happened!? Even if you planted a bug on him, there are other better alternatives—“

She suddenly stopped talking. There was a very long pause where she was probably carefully listening to the voice that was offering an explanation. Eventually, he heard her sigh, exhaling from her nose into the telephone receiver. “Well? What did you put in?”

A pause; the length it took to speak one word.

“I see.”

Another pause.

“No, I think it’s a sensible decision. I think I would’ve done the same thing.”

He heard the sound of her rising from her chair, and the sound of her shuffling around the room in her slippers. Her voice shifted towards the window. She was probably holding the phone and talking, walking around the room.

“Yeah, it’s not like that. He would’ve been dead a long time ago if it hit the

bug. I can't say for certain until I perform a detailed examination, but I'm pretty sure they're mist flashbacks."

Another pause.

The sound of her closing a window.

Yet another pause.

"Of course, you idiot. Anyway, this is all I'm going to say. Right now, all I am is a middle school nurse. I'm hiding your morning-after hangover-in-the-toilet and hitting it with glucose. If you don't care whether or not your entire project goes up in flames, you just do whatever the hell you want to out in the open. But you can't just go telling me to fix an overdose of mist with Mercurochrome¹ or Seirogan². It's just plain impossible. You'll put me in a tight spot if you ask me to do strange favors for you. Make this the last, and I mean last, time that you don't fully brief me. Understood?"

Without waiting even a second for an answer, she slammed the telephone receiver back down.

Silence returned to the nurse's office.

With her back to the light shining through the window, Shiina Mayumi's figure standing beside the bed turned into a lightly colored shadow on the dividing curtain, and indistinctly hovered about. Shiina Mayumi's shadow stared directly down at Asaba's head, almost as if she could see him through the curtains.

Before long, she asked, "Asaba-kun? Are you awake?"

Silence.

"Y'know, Kana-cha—" Shiina Mayumi hesitated. She continued, in a tone of voice like she was half talking to herself, "Please get along well with Iriya-san."

At that point, Asaba was already long asleep, deep in slumber.

TL Notes:

1. Mercurochrome: Mercurochrome (Merbromin) is a topical antiseptic used for minor cuts and scrapes. It is an organomercuric disodium salt compound and a fluorescein.

2. Seirogan: a pharmaceutical drug, sold as a treatment of the digestive tract (especially as an antidiarrhoeal), whose main active ingredient is “wood creosote” (also wood-tar creosote, or beechwood creosote)

*Basically, she’s listing these common school-administered medicines to show that a school nurse is clearly ill-equipped to deal with such a problem.

2-5

Chapter 2: Love Letter

2-5

He awoke because of the heat.

Specks of dust suspended in the air were glittering. The sunlight pouring in from the window had greatly shifted angles while he was asleep, pierced the dividing curtain, and was warming his face diagonally. He covered his eyes with his arms, kicked off the blanket that had become dampened from sweat, and sat up.

He didn't feel ill. Nor did he feel dizzy.

He felt like he had a dream where he fought with someone over the telephone.

"Shiina-sensei?"

He stuck his head out from an opening in the curtain. Shiina Mayumi was nowhere to be found. He looked at the clock on the wall, and was a little surprised. Lunch break had ended, and fifth period was beginning.

Somehow, he didn't feel too inclined to return to class.

"Maybe I should just head home for today," Asaba thought briefly.

For the time being, he left a note that read, 'I'm returning to class,' on Shiina Mayumi's desk, exited the nurse's office, and lazily wandered about the empty hallway. "Today is Wednesday. Fifth period on Wednesday is English, and the English teacher Kishimoto is quite the disagreeable old hag. Maybe it would have been wiser if I had stayed in the nurse's office until fifth period ended." By the time he had reached that conclusion, he was already standing in front of the classroom.

There was nobody in the classroom.

On the blackboard, written in thick bold characters, was the message, "**Fifth period English will be held in the audiovisual room.**"

“Today is a really bad for classes,” Asaba thought. His commendable attitude was immediately sunk. “I’m going to go home, after all.”

This time, he really made up his mind, and resolutely began preparing to go home. “Having English in the audiovisual room sounds pretty good, but Kishimoto would just show an English movie with the subtitles turned off and make everyone write their impressions down in English. Basically, she’d take the easy way out. What’s more, it’s fifth period. Around this time of the day half of the class is falling asleep anyway. The only person who could properly give an impression would be Iriya, given that she’s a returnee student—”

He stopped his preparations and paused. Asaba slowly raised his face and turned around to the back of the classroom.

Iriya’s desk was there.

At the moment, there was nobody in the classroom. The slanting rays of sunlight shining in diagonally from the windows accentuated the dimness of the classroom, and the gentle breeze carried with it the warmth of the sun.

An unsettling idea snuck into Asaba’s mind.

A combination of gastric fluid and feelings of nervousness weighed his stomach down. His heartbeat began to race. Asaba slowly inched his way towards Iriya’s desk. ‘What the hell are you thinking, you idiot? Cut it out, that’s definitely bad news—’ His other self was screaming at him from inside of his mind, but Asaba’s feet didn’t stop. In fact, he quickened his pace. He placed his hand on Iriya’s desk, and looked around the empty classroom once more. The clock on the wall came into view.

“Three minutes.”

“The time limit is three minutes. Even if I don’t find anything, I’m going to stop in three minutes,” he decided.

Commence operation.

He pulled out the chair and peeked inside the desk. Empty. He lifted her brand new school bag hanging on the hook and placed it on top of the desk. There weren’t any stickers pasted on it, and there weren’t any mascot straps attached either. The nametag holder, which most students removed because “it was

uncool and got in the way” remained attached to the bag handles, but the card inside didn’t have her name, address, phone number, or blood type.

He placed his fingers on the clasp of the bag’s cover.

His other self was frantically trying to stop him. ‘I won’t say anything bad about you anymore, so cut it out. This is seriously risky. Did you forget about all the crap you went through last night? You still don’t realize that you’re already neck deep in the gutter? You’re not some horny grade-schooler; what you’re doing is on a completely different level from sucking on the flute that belongs to some girl that you like. This girl is an agent from outer space!!’

“Yeah, right. Like a correspondent of the Sonohara Radio Wave would be afraid of aliens,” he fired back.

He inhaled nervously.

He unfastened the clasp.

He propped up the bag and opened it. He peered inside. Brand new textbooks and plain spiral-bound notebooks stood vertically on the right side, and some kind of cloth wrapper was stuffed on the left side. When he put it out on the desk, he realized it was a handbag. Something square-shaped was inside of it. It was too heavy to be a bento box.

“I should check out the bag first,” he thought to himself, and rifled through the compartments of the bag. A pass case came tumbling out. He opened it up. There were four unfamiliar cards inside.

One of them appeared to be a pass card that activated the Sonohara Base gate. It was made of plastic, thick enough so that he couldn’t easily bend it with his fingers, and had a magnetic strip on the back of it so that machines could recognize it. Iriya’s portrait was placed on the front, along with lines of completely foreign numbers and codes, and something that probably represented her address in the residential zone of Sonohara Base entered on it. He was puzzled over why the “Full Name” column was blank.

The remaining three cards all looked the same as each other. They resembled telephone cards. They all had rounded corners, were flimsy to the touch, and even had the small circular hole on the far right side. He pulled a telephone card

from out of his wallet, and lined them up. The size and shape matched up exactly. The more he looked at it, the more he had the feeling that these three cards were precisely telephone cards. But these three cards didn't have any letters or designs printed on them at all. The front and back were solid gray. There weren't any digits indicating the number of uses available, there wasn't a barcode, and there weren't any warning labels telling users not to bend it, dirty it, or keep it away from magnetic devices. The only thing that he could barely make out was a small triangular arrow that probably indicated which side was the front and which direction to insert it. But Asaba wondered if what these cards went into were really public telephones.

Asaba ignored the voice in his head screaming, "Stop it," and stuffed one of the three telephone card-like cards into his pocket.

He looked up at the clock on the wall. It was already past two minutes.

He panicked.

He put the cards back into the pass case and threw it into the bag's pocket. "I'll be done after checking this out," he told himself, and placed his hands on the handbag. Worrying about what he'd do if he found feminine hygiene products, he resolutely opened the bag.

He found three small plastic medicine bottles, a portable gaming device, and three software ROM packs.

The moment he saw the bottles of medicine, he felt a peculiar sense of relief that last night's events at the pool weren't a dream, after all. He opened the lid of the small bottle and poured its contents into the palm of his hand. They weren't sugarcoated pills; they were the compressed type. They were white, and didn't have any seals with letters or numbers on them. The contents of all three bottles appeared to be the same, but Asaba took three pills from each bottle, wrapped them each in tissues and stuffed them into his pocket. "It's all over. You're definitely going to be erased," the voice in his head muttered, dumbfounded.

Then, he picked up the final object: the portable gaming device.

It was a familiar, and rather common, gaming device. It had an analog D-pad, four buttons, a color LCD screen above that, and ports for displaying laser

images surrounding the screen. This model had three variations depending on price, and each variation had an exaggerated name that was somewhat embarrassing to say out loud. Iriya's model had three sub-screens that could display a hovering overlay, and, colloquially speaking, it was the "top-of-the-line and most expensive" type.

When he turned the gaming device over, there was a ROM pack already inserted into the software slot. There wasn't any manufacturer's logo, nor were there any colorful labels. Instead, there were letters and numbers scrawled onto it with black magic.

It read:

【BARCAP—S03】

"Maybe it's a pirated ROM," he thought to himself.

The other three ROM packs similarly read:

【DCA—S08】

【DCA—S14】

【BARCAP—S06】

His three minutes had long since passed. 'Enough is enough, hurry and put it away. Put everything back the way you found it and get the hell out of there,' the voice inside his head insisted, like usual. But even so, Asaba gripped the gaming device in his hands.

"I wonder what kind of games Iriya likes."

"The mysterious cards and large amounts of medicine might have been things that someone gave to Iriya, but this gaming device and software are things that Iriya herself chose to have. They're different from things that she's forced to carry. The decision was made by Iriya; not by anyone else."

He felt like playing this game would bring him closer to Iriya, rather than studying the cards or medicine.

He placed his finger on the gaming device's power button.

He pressed—

“What are you doing?”

At that very instant, his other self residing in his mind blew the canopy of his head off and bailed out in an ejection seat.

He thought he was going to die right then and there. He even screamed. “Earth is doomed,” he thought. He instinctively turned around, carelessly tripped over his own two feet, and dropped the gaming device.

Wrist hidden by a wristband, her right hand gracefully caught the gaming device midair. Her expression remained unchanged, and her eyes unblinking. She wasn’t even looking at the gaming device. Holding her English textbook and her plain spiral-bound notebooks at her side, staring expressionlessly at a frozen Asaba, Iriya asked him once again. “What are you doing?”

“This is an unexplainable situation,” he thought to himself. “Even if I do try to offer an explanation, it’s probably hopeless. An agent from outer space would never have mercy on a human sniffing around its belongings. Why in the world is Iriya here in the first place? Wasn’t it the middle of class right now? Wasn’t she supposed to be watching “Little House on the Prairie” without subtitles in the audiovisual room? Obviously, there’s some kind of device inside of her bag. She installed some kind of security device, so tiny that you can’t see it with a microscope, which triggers an alarm using telepathy if someone opens her bag. Iriya responded to that alarm, and teleported from the audiovisual room in order to destroy the meddling human who was trying to uncover her true identity. Time in the audiovisual room must be in stasis right now. At this very moment, everything is frozen in place: the drool dribbling out of Hanamura’s mouth; the movement of Nishikubo’s eyes as he reads a paperback under his desk; the fluttering of Laura Ingalls’ skirt as she runs at full speed through the forest calling for help for her father who had been injured by his rifle misfiring—”

“Move.” Iriya didn’t ask a third time.

As soon as Asaba staggered half a step backwards, Iriya silently approached her desk, and began cleaning up the contents of her bag that had been dragged out. It didn’t look like she was panicking or upset. It was like she was completely ignoring Asaba’s existence.

“U-Um—” Asaba began.

“I have to say something,” he thought.

“What happened to fifth period? Are you ditching?” he asked.

Iriya returned everything on her desk into her bag, fastened the clasp, and muttered, “Where’s the audiovisual room?”

“Huh?”

Iriya silently pointed to the blackboard at the front of the room. Without needing to turn around, Asaba knew what was written there: **“Fifth period English will be held in the audiovisual room.”**

“Why didn’t you just follow behind everyone el—” Asaba began to ask.

“When I got back, nobody was here.”

Asaba didn’t understand a thing she was saying.

Based on guesswork, Asaba tried to piece together what happened based on the facts he already knew and on Iriya’s fragmented sentences. “English teacher Kishimoto is very strict with time. For the most part, she’ll be in the classroom before the bell rings, and makes snide remarks towards students who come in late. So everyone changed classrooms early while Iriya was wandering around by herself during lunch break, and when she came back everyone was gone, and they just left her like that. I wonder if that’s what happened,” he thought.

He felt annoyed. “What a bunch of cold jerks,” he thought.

“But if I call them jerks, then I’m the same,” Asaba reconsidered. “Who’s the guy who said, ‘I have to go to the bathroom’ and ran away when Iriya pleaded for help after being surrounded by Nakagomi’s group and peppered with questions?”

Excuse-like thoughts filled his mind. “I couldn’t help it. I’m not smooth enough to defuse a situation like that. The dynamics that control a classroom environment are, for better or for worse, unique, complicated, and mysterious. I have no idea how it works. Besides, it wasn’t like Nakagomi and her friends had any bad intentions. That whole thing wasn’t really anyone’s fault. It was like an unfortunate collision. Logically speaking, that’s all it was.”

“Um—” he began.

“Putting aside logic for the moment, I’m going to apologize,” he thought to himself. “I’m going to apologize for abandoning Iriya and running away, and, of course, for opening her bag without permission. I need to at least let her know that, starting with Nakagomi, the guys in class aren’t all that bad.”

“Uh, about this morning—” He was suddenly interrupted.

The school public announcement speakers in the corner of the classroom looking down at the two of them came to life with a crackle. Two stanzas of the school song’s melody, which had extreme lyrics that caused a fuss within the PTA, flowed forth.

“Ahh, contacting, from class 2-4, Iriya—”

The voice suddenly grew distant, and asked someone, “It was Iriya, right?” It was vice-principal Tashiro. He constantly spoke with his mouth way too close to the microphone, and breathed loudly while speaking. Asaba felt like he would smell his bad breath through the speakers.

“Iriya Kana-san. Ahh, Iriya Kana-san from class 2-4, you have a phone call from Tanaka-san. Please proceed immediately to the faculty office. I repeat—”

“Phone call?” he wondered. Asaba turned around and looked at Iriya, with an expression that asked, ‘Who’s Tanaka-san?’

Right then, Asaba thought that he saw her expression tremble ever so slightly.

It was the final vestiges of an intense and raw emotion that burst through the surface of the massive walls erected around Iriya’s inner being. If Asaba had turned around just one moment earlier, he might have been able to discover the true form of that emotion. However, the holes drilled into the walls were instantly sealed, and Iriya returned to her usual self.

She grabbed her bag. “I’ll be going now,” she stated, gazing at Asaba.

She ran off.

Her skirt swayed in the air. Her hair fluttered.

Vice principal Tashiro exhaled from his nose one last time into the microphone, and left off with the school song’s melody. By the time the speakers had returned to silence, Asaba was the only living soul left in the classroom.

He heard the chirping of the cicadas.

2-6

Chapter 2: Love Letter

2-6

Following that, Asaba spent the rest of fifth period killing time in the library, and showed up properly for sixth period. Iriya ended up not returning after being called to the faculty office, and Modern Japanese teacher Ujiki explained, “Due to certain circumstances, Iriya had to leave school early.”

When cleanup time came around, Asaba was informed for the first time about Iriya’s ‘go away’ comment. After Asaba had said, ‘I have to go the bathroom’ and ran away, it seemed like Iriya made a few comments towards the Nakagomi group surrounding her desk: ‘Shut up. Go away.’

“It was amazing, man,” Nishikubo said in a low voice, leaning against the blackboard that had just been wiped with a wet cloth.

“Nakagomi even cried. The other three were *furiosus*,” Hanamura said. He sat on the teaching platform, deftly balancing a broom on the tips of his toes. With a smirk on his face, he began to mimic them. “Stuff like, ‘Is *that* how you talk to us!?’”

Nishikubo nodded. “They were going nuts.”

“Stuff like, ‘What’s wrong with you!? I cannot *believe* you!!’”

“But man, no matter what they said to Iriya, she kept her cool. Just as I was watching her, thinking, ‘Despite how she looks, she’s got some balls,’ blood starting dripping out of her nose. Drip, drip, drip,” Nishikubo added.

“Huh?” Asaba instinctively returned.

“Like, a nosebleed. Blood that comes out of the nose.”

The smell of chlorine and the image of crimson red staining the towel rose into Asaba’s mind.

“Anyway, those girls making a huge fuss retreated like wharf roaches upon

facing Iriya's nosebleed attack. Iriya took advantage of that opening and quickly left the classroom, and came back after the third period bell rang with a scrap of tissue paper stuffed up her nose."

Asaba tried to visualize Iriya with a scrap of tissue paper stuffed up her nose, but he couldn't picture it at all.

"And?" Asaba asked, wanting to know what happened next.

Nishikubo smirked. "It's obvious, isn't it? After that, everyone was like, 'let sleeping dogs do whatever,' or something."

"I guess so," Asaba thought. "She did tell them to 'go away,' after all. While I was dying in the nurse's office, Iriya managed to isolate herself in just the span of one day. Nakagomi and her friends are like the popular girls in class, so the other girls are afraid of getting pulled into a 'the ally of my enemy is my enemy' situation. It was over for Iriya. It was probably hard for Iriya to stay in the classroom, so she must've been wandering about the school aimlessly during lunch break. It's only natural that nobody told her anything and she was left behind when they changed classes."

His feelings of guilt deepened. "At that time, I didn't even need to do anything. If only I didn't run away to the bathroom, Iriya might have been able to make it through without saying, 'go away,'" he thought to himself. "And to make matters worse, she was confronted by a scene of me opening and rummaging through her bag without permission."

"I wanted to at least apologize to her. If only that baldy Tashiro hadn't called Iriya, right about now things would be—"

"Hey, you three over there. Stop slacking off and help carry these desks!" In the end, they ended up getting yelled at by Akiho. Akiho glared at them with a terrifying scowl, and Nishikubo and Hanamura grudgingly returned to cleaning. However, Asaba continued to stand flatfooted, deep in thought. Akiho tapped Asaba on the head with her broom.

"What're you spacing out for? Hurry up and—" she began. Her face suddenly grew serious. "Hey, are you alright? Are you okay? Do you feel sick again?"

"Huh? Did you say something?"

Akiho sighed softly, as if to say, 'Just that usual habit, huh?'

"Ah, oh yeah, Asaba. I'm skipping club activities today."

"Why?"

"I'm an Air Defense Committee Member now. I have to listen to the instructions for tomorrow, start preparations, that kind of stuff."

"Oh. The air raid drills are tomorrow, right?"

A Library Committee Member's job is to take care of the library's routine duties, a Health Committee Member's job is to bring students who are injured or who feel sick to the nurse's office, and an Air Defense Committee Member's job is to lead students and to conduct headcounts during air raid drills. Usually, Air Defense Committee Members don't have to do anything, so it's relatively popular among students as an "easy job."

Akiho smiled wryly. "Nakamura-sensei was really excited about this. He said like, 'This time, the theme is going to be realism.' It'll definitely drag on late, so I'll head straight home after. Tell the President for me too."

"Got it."

Asaba replied halfheartedly. He went back to cleaning. He rewired his brain, allotting 90% to meditation, and the remaining 10% to autopilot for everything below his neck. He mindlessly went about carrying desks, sweeping, and throwing away trash. Everything he was doing was on cruise control, and just like that, without even realizing it, he ended up working harder than everyone else around him.

He aimlessly continued to think about Iriya.

Chapter 2: Love Letter

2-7

The very embodiment of water and oil, Suizenji Kunihiro and Sudou Akiho bickered whenever they came face to face with each other. However, between the two they did have a few things in common.

First: they were both good at rock-paper-scissors.

Second: they both possessed voracious appetites.

The way Suizenji devoured his food, you'd think that he had bugs living in his stomach, and the way Akiho devoured her food, you'd think that she had a bunch of kids in hers. The "Shimizu" diner nearby Sonohara Middle School was like the Newspaper Club's second clubroom. Asaba, the only one who ate normal-sized servings of rice with no second helpings, was constantly teased by the old lady who ran the place. It was only natural that Suizenji, a healthy young man with a full-bodied physique, ate extra large servings; but it was even more amazing that Akiho ate just as much as he did. The two of them always had mind-bogglingly huge bento boxes, and were constantly munching on something in the clubroom. Standing on the sidelines observing, it was indeed odd that even though they ate that much, they didn't put on any weight at all. But Asaba thought of this as more of a matter of "how much vigor they put into living life each and every day."

And today, yet again, Suizenji arrived at the clubroom with food in hand. He wolfed down an anpan¹ and a pork-cutlet sandwich, and chugged a bottle of unhealthy-looking colored juice.

"Iriya, Kanaaa?" Suizenji contemplated for less than a second, and declared, "What kind of porn star is she? Amateur?"

"You're one to talk, having a name like an Enka² singer," Asaba thought silently. "Never mind, forget it," he replied.

Asaba sulked and looked away. “Asking the President for advice was a mistake in the first place,” Asaba thought to himself. Suizenji pulled out three onigiri³ from the school store bag and began to munch on them. After scarfing down two of them, he glanced at Asaba from the corner of his eye.

“Horreshponden Ahaba.”

“Haah?”

Suizenji’s Adam’s apple shifted abruptly, and he instantaneously cleared his full mouth.

“Correspondent Asaba.”

“What is it?”

“Upon opening the gates of my heart and listening carefully, the sigh of a distressed young boy who wishes to share his inner thoughts comes drifting my way. Or is this just my imagination?”

“It’s just your imagination.”

“Alright then.”

Suizenji withdrew all too easily. This time, he pulled out a yakisoba cup from the school store bag, and started to pour boiling water into it with Akiho’s personal electric water kettle. Staring at Suizenji with a half-amazed expression, Asaba mused over the thoughts he had carried over from the classroom.

“At any rate, I’d like an opportunity to talk with Iriya,” he thought to himself.

“First off, I want to apologize to her. I have a ton of things I want to ask her, and if she really is isolated from the rest of the class, then I’d like to at least be someone she can talk to,” he thought. That being said, he really didn’t like the idea of being shunned together with Iriya. Even if Akiho were to call him a huge coward, he couldn’t help thinking that way.

He racked his brains. “If only there was an excuse I could use to talk to her,” he thought. “An excuse so that even if I talked with Iriya in front of everyone, it wouldn’t arouse their ire.”

“Anyway, you’re eating a lot today too, huh?” Asaba changed the subject.

Suizenji, who had been disposing of the yakisoba cup's boiling water out the window, turned around quickly. "I got called out suddenly during lunch break, so I didn't have any time to eat."

"You got called out? By who? By a teacher? By a bunch of thugs?"

"A first year girl. We ate a really fancy homemade bento together."

"So you did eat," Asaba muttered.

"That's pretty rare for this time of the year," Asaba thought to himself. "The 'Hot and Popular Suizenji Phenomenon' that inevitably takes place early spring among new female students usually dies down by itself around the middle of first semester. Suizenji's personality usually spreads and makes itself known by then, but occasionally there's the sort of girl who becomes obsessed and continues to be misled, only to hand him an exceedingly out-of-fashion love letter."

"Well? How was it?"

"Terrible. Like I'd get full eating that tiny thing."

"No, not that, I meant how was it talking to her."

"Not worth speaking of. In the end, the name Jesse Marcel⁴ didn't come up. She's not my enemy."

"Suizenji-san. Why is it that when you're together with a girl eating her handmade bento that she poured her heart into, you talk about the Roswell Incident?" Asaba thought in his mind.

With a Buddhist-like state of mind, Asaba extended his condolences to the unnamed and mysterious first year girl. "Live strong," he thought. And with that, his earlier thoughts were reaffirmed: "it would be useless to ask the President for advice about Iriya. Suppose he even does listen seriously to what I have to say. The most he's going to say is crap like,

'If you want to apologize, go apologize.'

'If you have something you want to ask, go ask.'

'If you want to be someone she can talk to, go be it. Don't mind other people.'"

Asaba felt that, in a way, that advice was extremely appropriate. But, if he were actually capable of that, he wouldn't be worrying in the first place.

Suizenji ceased picking up noodles with his chopsticks, and, suddenly remembering something, declared, "Yo, speaking of which, where's Correspondent Sudou?"

"Huh? Ohh, right. Akiho said that she'd be staying late doing Air Defense Committee stuff, so she'd just head straight home today."

Suizenji clicked his tongue. "I see. Disaster drills are tomorrow, huh?"

"You mean air raid drills, right?"

"Don't be stupid. What part of those things are 'air defense?' Doing crap like lining up in the hallway when the siren rings, holding our heads and turning into turtles, waddling to the front of the shelter, lining up and counting how many people there are. If you could survive an airstrike with those idiotic drills, nobody would be suffering right now. No matter how much you believe in it, it won't do a damn thing for earthquakes, thunder, fires, or fathers⁵."

Suizenji reclined in his chair and looked up at the ceiling. "Damn, just skip that stupid committee meeting. Without her here, we can't even decide on the layout for the next issue."

"Oh, that's right. What are we going to do for next issue's featured article? The mountain camp was a complete wash, and we can't write an article about just camping, right?"

"Hmmmm," Suizenji deliberated. "Correspondent Asaba. Are you free next Saturday and Sunday?"

"Yeeaahhh, for the time being."

Suizenji leaned forward, causing his chair to creak. "Correspondent Asaba. Since it's come to this, how does sneaking into Sonohara Base's restricted areas with a camera in hand and taking as many pictures as we want of UFO wreckages and alien corpses sound to you?"

Asaba answered bluntly, "We'll get caught, 100%. If you're going to do it, please do it by yourself, President."

“As long as we can take pictures, who cares if we get caught, right?”

“If our film gets confiscated, wouldn’t it be the same as not being able to take any pictures at all? Let me just tell you, if we get arrested on a USAF facility, Japanese juvenile laws won’t amount to anything in there. We’ll definitely get handcuffed and thrown into interrogation rooms. Even your specialty asshole will get searched.”

Regarding this “specialty asshole,” allow me to elaborate. This year’s spring, during the “Spiritual Phenomena” Suizenji boom, there was an incident where Suizenji and Asaba snuck into the girls’ restroom at a train station that was rumored to have ghost appearances in order to gather data, when they had the police called on them.

This wasn’t included in the article in May’s issue, but, unfortunately, at that moment in time Suizenji and Asaba were cross-dressing as women. Naturally, this was Suizenji’s idea. The reason for this wasn’t because they were sneaking into the girls’ restroom to gather data, but rather, because, according to rumors, the ghost in question was “the ghost of an office lady who was brokenhearted and hung herself,” and “would strangle from behind any woman who entered the girls’ restroom who was more beautiful than herself.” Asaba, who was wearing his little sister’s uniform that he had brought, already looked suspicious enough, but Suizenji, who was about 175cm tall and outfitted with a “mother going shopping” look, was just a horror to behold. Someone from the neighborhood noticed them and called the police, and Asaba panicked when he saw the patrol car and ran like a madman. However, Suizenji didn’t move a step, voluntarily provided the officer with his student I.D., and declared, “I am a journalist in the middle of gathering data for a case.” Suizenji was taken to the Sonohara Police Station and given a grave warning. The next day, after school, Suizenji triumphantly returned to the clubroom with a grand smile, took out a roll of film from his pocket and threw it to Asaba.

“Th-this! Could this be the film from last night!? How did it not get confiscated!? Where did you hide it!?”

With a smile that seemed to declare, “This is a victory for journalism,” Suizenji

answered in a thundering voice that shook the clubroom building, “In my asshole!!”

Ultimately, that film ended up not being used in the article. Akiho, in a fit of rage, used a pair of utility gloves and flung the film into the incinerator. But even now, Asaba thought the whole thing was quite a shame. Even if they didn’t include it in the newspaper, he at least wanted to have the film developed.

Perhaps there might have been something in the photos.

Some otherworldly being.

“How naïve, Correspondent Asaba. There are many more ‘holes’ other than the one between your butt cheeks.” Suizenji laughed defiantly, holding his yakisoba cup in his hand. “For instance, if you use a digital camera, a laptop, and your cellphone, all you have to do is send the photos you took outside of the base using FTP. As long as your laptop doesn’t leave a log, even if we get arrested the image files will be preserved.”

“We’ll just end up getting tortured.”

“Correspondent Asaba. Do you not desire to ascertain the true identity of the foo fighter? As a journalist, do you not desire to be thrown to the ground and to be Mirandized at least once? Ohh maaan, just thinking about it gives me the chills.”

Not knowing whether Suizenji’s comments were serious or not was quite frightening. Right when he was seriously considering putting a stop to the madness,

“Ah.” Asaba finally realized. “I see. I should probably ask Iriya.”

Suizenji had a puzzled look. “Correspondent Asaba. What are you talking about?”

“Umm, long story short, a transfer student joined our class today. A girl named Iriya Kana, whose brother works as an officer or something for the JASDF. They’re living in Sonohara Base’s residential zone at the moment. Restricted areas are probably no good, but if it’s just to observe the base, maybe if we ask

her—”

“CORRESPONDENT ASABA!! WHY DIDN’T YOU BRING THIS UP EARLIER!?”

Asaba tumbled off of his chair. Suizenji hurled his half-eaten yakisoba cup across the room and stood up. He raced to the corkboard hanging on the wall, added an “Iriya” column to the “Great Finds Chart,” and suddenly pasted 10 stickers under it.

“Follow me, Correspondent Asaba!!”

“H-Haah!?”

Suizenji bolted out of the clubroom. Completely clueless as to what was going on, Asaba chased after him, but there was no way that a guy like Asaba could keep up with Suizenji’s full speed, considering that he ran an 11 second 100 meter dash. Cutting across the schoolyard and leaping through the doors, Asaba lost sight of Suizenji’s back around the first corner he turned. But, wherever Suizenji went, he left a wake of girls screaming, “Kyaaah,” and “Uwaaah,” so Asaba had a general idea of where he was going.

Gasping for breath, Asaba arrived at Class 2-4. The sunset pouring through the windows stained the room.

The few remaining students in the classroom were all dumbfounded by Suizenji’s sudden appearance.

Suizenji slowly looked around the classroom. “Correspondent Asaba. Which one is the transfer student from outer space?”

Asaba hadn’t said a word about any of that, but it seemed that Suizenji already had his mind set.

“I-Iriya, was called, t-to the office, during fifth period, and went home early,” Asaba panted.

“Correspondent Asaba. No other clubs have set their eyes on this transfer student yet, correct?”

Trying his best to catch his breath, Asaba shook his head. “I didn’t exactly make sure, but there’s no reason for any club to scout out Iriya,” he thought to himself. “And I don’t think Iriya herself has shown any signs of wanting to join

other clubs.”

“President, do you want Iriya to—”

Suizenji declared bluntly, “Heck yeah. Our club will be taking that transfer student. We can’t let those other clubs get the jump on us. Our Sonohara Radio Wave Newspaper Club is always in need of brilliant individuals.”

“What will we do if the actual person herself doesn’t want to?” Asaba thought.

However, he also saw another way of thinking about it. “If Iriya were to join the Newspaper Club, wouldn’t that be ‘an excuse so that even if I talked with Iriya in front of everyone, it wouldn’t arouse their ire?’”

He further contemplated. “If Iriya were to join the Newspaper Club, something about this completely inexplicable situation might be revealed. Whatever that might be, if I throw Suizenji into the fire, it’ll serve as a catalyst for the chemical reaction, and some kind of conclusion will reveal itself.”

Bathing in the sunlight shining on his face, Suizenji cackled defiantly.

The first day of second semester was finally over.

The cicadas were chirping.

TL Notes:

1. Anpan: Japanese sweet roll most commonly filled with red bean paste.
2. Enka: a popular Japanese music genre considered to resemble traditional Japanese music stylistically.
3. Onigiri: a Japanese food made from white rice formed into triangular or oval shapes and often wrapped in nori.
4. Jesse Marcel: man who voiced his suspicion that debris he recovered on a ranch near Roswell in 1947 was “not of this world.”
5. A list of things that are generally feared.
6. The **Miranda warning**, also referred to as **Miranda rights**, is a warning given by police in the United States to criminal suspects in police custody (or in a

custodial interrogation) before they are interrogated to preserve the admissibility of their statements against them in criminal proceedings.

Chapter 2: Love Letter

2-8

The next day, perhaps as the victim of somebody's harassment, there was a live cat stuffed inside of Asaba's shoe locker.

A morning of sleep deprivation awaited Asaba after he spent the entire night doing nothing but copying homework. For the second day in a row, Asaba again went to school running late. The tiny bike lot was already overflowing with bikes, and Asaba was forced to lock his bike against a fence quite a distance away from the roof of the lot. After school, the setting sun sits right on top of that area, so when it's time to go home, the bike seat gets so hot that it's impossible to sit on it. But he had no other place to park his bike. He rushed through the school building's entrance, and placed his hands on his shoe locker door to get his indoor shoes out.

That's where his everyday routine ended.

The instant he opened the shoe locker door, a brown tabby kitten flew out and latched itself onto Asaba's face, and socked him with a lightning-quick one-two punch. Asaba was immediately down for the count. The kitten let out a growl and ran out the door. Asaba scrambled hastily into the classroom, and when Akiho saw his face and asked him, "What's with that?" he realized for the first time that there was a considerable amount of blood coming from out of the scratches.

"Here, look at me," Akiho said.

Asaba sat down sideways and hesitantly raised his face.

"Geez, who the heck would play such a cruel prank?" Akiho was fuming. Of the Band-Aids that she regularly kept inside of her bag, she took the biggest one and roughly slapped it onto the bridge of Asaba's nose. "Poor kitty, being stuffed into such a tiny space."

“That’s what you’re worried about?” Asaba thought to himself.

“Could that brown kitten be the one that’s been wandering around the bus stop frequently? Its tail was a little crooked for about three months. Did it have a collar?” Akiho asked.

“I don’t think it did. But then again, I only saw for a moment.”

Akiho put her box of Band-Aids back in her bag. “There are two brown cats that live in that area. The little one that doesn’t have a collar is probably a stray, and the one that’s a little bigger with a collar is the Takizawa Stationery Store’s Kojirou.”

Akiho was always writing “adopt a pet” articles, so she was exceptionally knowledgeable about the dogs and cats in the areas around school.

“Not that it really matters either way, but—” Akiho continued.

Rubbing his bandaged up nose, Asaba mused absentmindedly. “Who, and why, in the world would anyone put a cat into my shoe locker?”

Right then, he suddenly sensed someone staring at him. Asaba nonchalantly turned around, which prompted Akiho to follow.

Iriya, who was gazing intently at Asaba, quickly cast her eyes downward.

“What was that?” Akiho muttered. Asaba felt somewhat uncomfortable, and returned to looking forward. Akiho, however, continued to stare. She lowered her voice, and said, “Hey Asaba, did you hear about the ‘go away?’”

Asaba nodded.

“Don’t you think that’s awful? No wonder Maki-chan and the others hate her.”

“But—”

“That’s just too much. If she accidentally let it slip then she should’ve just apologized. She doesn’t even think she did anything wrong. I don’t know who she thinks she is, but if she keeps that up she’ll never make any friends. And what’s with those wristbands? Does she think that they’re cool?”

Asaba looked up in surprise. This was the first time he had ever heard Sudou Akiho talk down on someone that much. However, it was Akiho after all, and she

did seem surprised at the words that came out of her own mouth. She noticed Asaba's stare, immediately covered up with a smile, and forcibly changed the subject.

"Umm, hey Asaba, did you decide on anything with the President yesterday? Like the layout for next issue's articles?"

This time, it was Asaba who was startled. "Ah, um, we didn't exactly decide on that, but—"

Yesterday they ended up deciding on something outrageous.

"But what?"

"Uh—"

"What is it?"

For some reason, it seemed like Akiho really disliked Iriya, so Asaba felt like it would be very bad timing to bring it up right now. "But she'll find out eventually anyway, so it'll be less painful if I just spit it out early," he thought.

"Let's just get it over with," he decided.

"I talked to the President in the clubroom yesterday about Iriya. I said that there was this kind of strange girl that transferred into our class."

Akiho remained silent. She stared at Asaba, her expression unchanged.

"Well, when I mentioned that it seemed like Iriya was living in Sonohara Base, the President was really pleased. We can't really write an article about just camping in the mountains, and we were talking about sneaking into Sonohara Base to take pictures anyway, so we decided that we'd pick her up before she gets taken by any other clubs—"

And then, the worst possible man appeared at the worst possible timing.

The door at the back of the classroom practically flew off. Everyone in the classroom looked up in surprise.

"Correspondent Iriya!!"

Suizenji was there. His silver-rimmed hipster glasses glistened brightly. His slicked back hair looked like the back of a fully-grown cockroach.

And, as unbelievable as it may seem, he was holding a bouquet of sunflowers.

Ignoring the stares of everyone around him, Suizenji walked forward with long strides and stood directly in front of Iriya's desk. He presented the bouquet of flowers with such force that a few petals fell off, and declared,

"We, the Sonohara Radio Wave Newspaper Club, are an organization of elite journalists that provide readers with a variety of knowledge as wide as the solar system itself, at radio wave speeds! Today, in an age where the people cry out in terror in the face of the impending outbreak of war, there is a necessity like never before for journalism that strives to expose for the people the true facts of this chaotic world!! Now, together with us, become a holy warrior in the search for truth!!"

Iriya stared at Suizenji, and then shifted her gaze to the bouquet of flowers held out in front of her.

And then, in a "Well, since it's here I might as well take it," kind of fashion, she stretched out her arms and accepted the bouquet of flowers. However, Suizenji interpreted that as a sign of her intention to join the club.

"Welcome!!" He shouted in a booming voice and quickly spun around. He looked at Asaba and gave him a big thumbs up.

"I don't know how I'm supposed to react to that," Asaba thought to himself.

"Well then, Correspondent Iriya, we shall meet again after school!!"

Suizenji left off with that and leisurely strolled out of the classroom, laughing loudly.

Instantaneously, the entire classroom was filled with hushed whispers that practically shook the ground.

"I gotta say something," Asaba thought. "Long story short, what I talked to the President about was, uh, since Iriya is living in Sonohara Base, if we ask her nicely, maybe they'll let us observe the inside of the base," he concluded.

Akiho glared at him with a terrifying scowl. Asaba felt like he was getting strangled, and kept his mouth tightly shut. Akiho glared at Asaba, then glared at Iriya, and then finally glared at the door at the back of the classroom that

Suizenji left out of. She muttered her usual phrase,

“That’s so stupid.”

Among the hushed whispers that seemed to shake the Earth, Iriya, not knowing what to do, stared at the bouquet of flowers in her arms.

Chapter 2: Love Letter

2-9

Asaba's morning was a complete mess.

Asaba, having survived first period, felt the need to offer Iriya an explanation. He'd explain to her what kind of activities the Newspaper Club partook in, the President's personality, and, if despite all of that, she still wanted to join, then he'd welcome her, otherwise— If it came to that, then he'd try and invite her himself one more time.

Probably because he just saw Suizenji's amazingly bold moves, he steeled his resolve relatively quickly. Asaba stood up and turned around— She was gone.

Iriya wasn't in her usual seat at the far back of the classroom, three seats from the side of the hallway. All that was there was the bouquet of sunflowers placed in a bucket labeled "2-4" lying next to her desk. Asaba looked around in a panic. He barely caught a glimpse of Iriya's backside as she was leaving the classroom.

"I wonder where she's going," he thought.

Asaba chased after her. When he almost caught up with her, he slowed his pace, and followed her after putting a little bit of distance between the two of them. He was nervous. "How should I call out to her? Where should I begin to explain?" While he was spacing out thinking, they had arrived at the main entrance on the first floor. There were dusty shoe lockers for visitors, slippers scattered over old wooden boards, a receptionist window with thousand-year-old curtains drawn over it, and three public telephones to the side of the window.

Iriya walked over to the far right telephone, and pulled out a grey card from her wallet.

Asaba's heart skipped a beat.

There was no doubt about it. It was that mysterious grey card that looked and felt like a telephone card.

Iriya lifted the telephone receiver, and slid the card into the slit.

Asaba focused his eyes. He stared at the movements of Iriya's fingers.

#, 0, 6, 2, 4.

Iriya punched in those numbers, and remained silent with the receiver pressed against her ear.

Iriya remained that way for almost a minute. Maybe nobody answered, or maybe she was listening to some kind of information service. Before long, she put down the receiver, pulled out the card that was ejected from the telephone, and turned around much sooner than Asaba had predicted.

Their eyes met.

Iriya practically froze. Asaba immediately covered up with a nonchalant expression.

"You were on the phone, so it was a little hard to call out."

Iriya remained silent. She didn't even blink.

"U-Um, sorry about this morning. That was pretty surprising, huh? That guy who suddenly came bringing flowers, that's our President. I talked with him about you yesterday, and he said that he really wanted you to join our club. He does pull some crazy stunts from time to time, but he's really not a bad person, so—"

Silence.

"So, uh, I'm also part of the Newspaper Club. Sudou Akiho—do you know her?—she's also a member. Right now the only members are the President, Akiho, and me, but—"

Asaba paused for a moment and took a breath. Summoning up courage from the pits of his stomach, he spit it out. "So basically, um, if you join the club, it'd become four members."

Well, duh.

That being said, that completely random statement was Asaba's absolute best attempt at inviting Iriya to join the club.

Having said all that he could, Asaba lowered his gaze and stared at his toes. The silence persisted. Unable to stand the silence, Asaba spoke. "U-Um, you don't need to decide right away, take your time and think it over—"

"I'm busy." Iriya suddenly spoke.

Immediately after she uttered those words, she turned around. Without giving Asaba a moment to respond, she ran off, as if rejecting Asaba.

Iriya's two words reverberated throughout Asaba's mind.

'I'm busy.'

She said it in her unique, awkward tone of voice.

"I wonder what she means," he wondered to himself. "Does she mean, 'I'm busy right now, so I can't hear you out at the moment,' or does she mean, 'I'm busy with a lot of things, so I can't participate in any clubs?'"

"Well, I've done all I can," he thought.

He felt exhausted from the tension. He decided to return to class, and began to walk.

"The grey card."

He froze in his tracks.

He looked around. There was nobody there.

This area was relatively far from the classrooms, and foot traffic was pretty sparse. The din of the school buildings sounded like distant echoes. Asaba lowered his breath, and stood in front of the public telephone on the far right that Iriya had just been using.

He pulled out the grey card that he took out of Iriya's bag yesterday.

He pressed the receiver against his ear, and inserted the card into the slit.

There was some kind of noise, and then a familiar tone.

He slowly pressed the buttons.

#, 0, 6, 2, 4.

There wasn't even a ringtone. The telephone line immediately connected to something.

A synthetic voice that mimicked a female tone began to speak.

* * *

“This is the Advanced JSTARS¹ Datalink. A picture-call has been requested from terminal S, S, 0, 9, 8, 1, 1, 3. The current time is 1, 0, 0, 4. The AWACS² currently in operation are: Navaho 02, Shield 01, Shield 02, Gorki 05. Situation report. Navaho 02: picture clear. Shield 01, picture clear. Shield 02, picture clear. Gorki 05, picture clear. Repeat. Navaho 02, picture clear. Shield 01—”

Somewhere nearby, cicadas were chirping.

Asaba slammed the receiver down.

He snatched the card the telephone spit out, and fled the scene.

He wanted to go somewhere without cicadas, somewhere with people.

He ran to the second floor. After blending in with the crowd of students, he finally felt a slight sense of relief. He drank from the water fountain until he felt like he would vomit. He wiped his mouth with his arm, and— At that instant, he realized.

0624.

June 24th was, throughout the world, UFO day.

TL Notes:

1. JSTARS: The **Northrop Grumman E-8 Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System (Joint STARS)** is a United States Air Force battle management and command and control aircraft. It tracks ground vehicles and some aircraft, collects imagery, and relays tactical pictures to ground and air theater commanders. The aircraft is operated by both active duty Air Force and Air National Guard units and also carries specially trained U.S. Army as additional flight crew.

2. AWACS: Airborne Warning and Control System. An airborne radar system designed to detect aircraft, ships and vehicles at long ranges and perform control and command of the battle space in an air engagement by directing fighter and attack aircraft strikes.

2-10

Chapter 2: Love Letter 2-10

Plan 26.

First, I'll wait until lunch break. My window of opportunity is immediately after fourth period's final bell rings. With that timing, the entire class will be in an uproar. Everyone will be hungry and will only have their empty stomachs and lunch on their mind. I'll casually get up, casually walk, and casually stand in front of the seat at the back of the classroom, three desks from the side of the hallway.

Here, I'll say my lines.

"Iriya, can I talk with you for a second? I have something important to say."

I'll bring Iriya and we'll casually leave the classroom. We'll walk down the hallway, maintaining a careful distance from each other, and then we'll go up the stairs. We'll head for the clock tower's machinery room. We won't draw anyone's attention there. Once we reach the machinery room, I'll forcibly push her down and— No, wait. My lines, my lines.

"About yesterday. I want to apologize for opening your bag without permission."

I'll throw in a bit of hesitation and mumbling for good effect. It'd be ideal if I could make an expression that shows that I'm reflecting on my actions. And then, I'll slowly put my hand in my pocket, and "Here. I was wondering what this was, and I accidentally kept it in my pocket. I missed the opportunity to return it, so here it is. Sorry."

I'll take out the grey card, and return it to Iriya.

Alright.

This plan just might work.

2-11

Chapter 2: Love Letter

2-11

Asaba somehow managed to survive through second, third, and fourth period. Lunch break had arrived.

The instant the fourth period final bell rang, the air of voracious appetites swirling around within the classroom was released all at once. With Nakagomi's order, everyone rose and paid their respects. About half of the students took their seats and took out their bentos, and the remaining half dashed out of the classroom towards the school store.

Yesterday, when Asaba was about to dig through Iriya's bag, his other self residing in his mind so aptly stated: "You still don't realize that you're already neck deep in the gutter?"

That was precisely the situation he was in right now.

There was something massive on the other side of this superficial everyday life. Something he had never seen before until now. And even if his eyes had seen it, his brain had never acknowledged it. It was like the signs of something advancing secretly towards humanity. Asaba was finally beginning to notice signs of that something.

He was in the process of stepping away from an important place.

"I should at least return what I took from Iriya's bag," he thought. "I have no idea whether or not that'll fix anything, but I can't just sit here and do nothing."

"Before it's too late."

Amidst the clamor of lunch break, Asaba took a deep breath.

Plan 26. *Action*

He casually stood up.

“Yo, Asaba. No bento today?” It was Nishikubo.

“Well, no, not exactly.”

Asaba went through great lengths from second period until now to scrape up what little courage he could. He couldn't turn back now. Stumbling over the legs of desks haphazardly scattered about the room, he walked straight towards Iriya's desk. He buried his hand in his pocket, and traced the edges of the grey card with his fingers. Iriya picked up her handbag and was getting ready to stand up, when she noticed Asaba approaching. She stiffened up.

“Iriya, can I talk with you for a second?”

Plan 27: wait until Iriya isn't there and throw the card into her desk.

“Too late for that,” he thought to himself.

“Um, I have something important to—”

It was that very moment.

At that moment, Nishikubo and Hanamura were leaning forward in their seats, straining their ears to hear what Asaba was saying to Iriya. Akiho stopped in the middle of opening her gigantic bento box, and was closely watching Asaba and Iriya from the corner of her eye. In the faculty room, which had its own unique relaxed atmosphere, 35-year-old bachelor Kawaguchi Taizou reclined back in his chair, held a takeout menu in one hand, and debated over whether he should have the pork cutlet rice bowl or the chilled soba today. In the nurse's office, Shiina Mayumi was pouring boiling water from a pot into her udon cup. The usual struggle for bread and onigiri was unfolding at the school store, and Suizenji, wallet between his teeth, was kicking and beating away rivals that blocked his path.

It was at that very moment of what should have been an exceedingly ordinary lunch break.

All at once, every speaker throughout the school began to blare extremely loud sirens.

It was a Level One air raid warning.

2-12

Chapter 2: Love Letter

2-12

Everyone was scared senseless.

It was war.

War had finally begun.

That's what everyone thought.

Whenever a Level Three or above siren rings, students are to quickly exit into the hallways, crouch down, assume the anti-blast position, and standby until further orders. During all of this, teachers have a duty to evacuate the students safely. Within Sonohara Middle School, there are five teachers that possess "Third Class Evacuation Leader" qualifications obtained by taking JSDF training courses. Those five teachers form a core unit that supervises students and guides them to the bomb shelter. That's how the system was arranged.

That system wasn't worth a damn.

In the face of the sirens that broadcasted the end of the world, not a single student, let alone teacher, was able to move a muscle. Nobody knew the extent of this gaping abyss that suddenly pierced everyday life.

"Today was an air raid drill day."

Who, exactly, was the first person to recall that?

"This is a drill, right? Today's a drill day, isn't it?" Such whispers began to rise here and there within the school building. Those whispers gradually intensified in volume, and spread throughout the school building like a game of "telephone." All who heard the whispers felt a great sense of relief, and proceeded to half-indignantly vent their frustrations to the others around them. "I knew it. I knew this was a drill. There's no way war would really break out. God, what a false alarm. Isn't it normal to play a broadcast letting us know that it's a drill and *then*

ring the alarms? But man, you should've seen your face earlier, your mouth was thiiiiiiiis wide—”

The sirens continued to ring.

“Heeeey! They're saying it's just a drill!!” Someone in the hallways shouted out. The frozen air of Class 2-4, triggered by that shout, immediately began to melt away.

Asaba let out a sigh of relief.

He recalled Akiho's words. “Nakamura-sensei was really excited about this. He said like, ‘This time, the theme is going to be realism.’”

“So that's why there was a Level One warning, huh?” he thought to himself.

Asaba felt like they had gone way too far. For air raid drills, they were supposed play a broadcast announcing to the effect that this was going to be a drill, and then ring the sirens afterwards. This was the first time they had rung the alarms suddenly and without warning.

The sirens continued to ring.

“But, to their credit, this method was quite effective,” Asaba thought.

“At the very least, this incident clearly brings to the forefront the fact that this is a huge problem. When the siren rings, we're all supposed to go into the hallways and turn into turtles, but when push comes to shove nobody can even move. Not a single one of them. Only when they realize that this is a drill and that there's no real danger do they finally start sluggishly moving into the hallways. Nakamura's probably sitting in the broadcast room right about now with a huge ‘I got ‘em good’ grin on his face.” Asaba's mind raced. He suddenly turned and looked at Iriya.

And there, Asaba witnessed an expression of true terror.

Iriya's normally expressionless face was warped into an expression of pure, unadulterated terror.

Iriya sank to the ground, as if paralyzed. She looked up at the blaring sirens like a hopelessly cornered creature. She tried to stand, but she stumbled forward, tripped over the desk legs, and fell flat on her face.

Flustered, Asaba tried to help her up. His eyes locked with Iriya's terror-filled eyes.

The sirens continued to ring.

"Maybe," Asaba began to think, "Iriya mistakenly believes that this siren is the real deal?"

"It's okay," Asaba shouted over the blaring sirens in a loud voice.

This is just a drill. That's what he tried to say.

But an instant before he could utter those words, Asaba saw something within Iriya's eyes harden with resolve.

Iriya grabbed Asaba's hand.

She gripped it tightly.

With everyone around them staring in shock, Iriya leapt up and ran forward pulling Asaba's hand. They flew out of the classroom and dashed through the hallway.

"W-What's wrong!? Hold on—"

Asaba was unable to say anything more. Iriya wasn't listening at all, anyway. Iriya continued to run, pulling Asaba's hand. She was running at a ridiculous speed. Asaba, who was moving his legs as fast as he possibly could, was practically being dragged along. Students streamed out of their classrooms into the hallways, being led by Air Defense Committee Members. They listlessly lined up along the walls, slowly crouched down on the floor, and turned into turtles. The anti-blast position. Exactly as depicted on page 63 of the student handbook, under "In case of emergencies." In order to survive the first wave of aftershocks of a nuclear bombing. In order to survive even if war broke out.

The sirens continued to ring.

Iriya suddenly stopped in the middle of the sea of turtles lining the hallway.

She looked over the swarm of turtles in stunning disbelief. She screamed in a heart-wrenchingly desperate tone of voice, "What the hell are you guys doing!?" she screamed.

“How the hell is that going to help!?” she screamed.

“Stand up and run!! Follow me if you don’t want to die!!” she screamed.

Not a single person stood up. A turtle nearby looked up in surprise at Iriya’s shouting and stared at her, as if saying, “What the hell is this girl shouting about?”

It was a rather odd spectacle to behold.

It was a sight that Asaba had never before seen until now.

It was the first time that Asaba, who until this moment in time had been a turtle during every drill, was able to observe an air raid drill from standing height. The columns of turtles lining the traditionally messy hallways, when observed from an upright position, were surprisingly zigzagged. There were groups of turtles bunched up and huddled against each other in the shadows of the piled up cardboard boxes and cleaning equipment lockers. He could immediately tell with a single glance that it was most likely an unconscious behavior. If you questioned them about it, they’d probably deny it, but they were unconsciously thinking somewhere in their minds that if they were to hide in the shadows of those cardboard boxes and cleaning equipment lockers, they’d at least have some kind of way of protecting themselves from the impact of the nuclear warheads exploding in the skies above Sonohara Base. 35-year-old bachelor Kawaguchi Taizou stood on the other far side of the hallway they had just run through. “Hey, you two over there! What are you doing? Hurry up and crouch along the walls like the other turtles,” he shouted, waving his arms. To Asaba, Kawaguchi looked like low-ranking prison guard working his turtle slaves to the bone.

“And why aren’t you turning into a turtle?” Asaba thought. “What were *you* doing when this siren starting ringing? Weren’t you frozen stiff like the rest of us were? You’re acting all high and mighty now that you realized it’s a drill, but I guess since you’re yelling so arrogantly you have the confidence that you’ll be able to do the same when the real sirens go off, right? Surely you won’t abandon ship and run for dear life, shoving aside those students hiding in the shadows of the cardboard boxes and lockers, not becoming a turtle yourself, right? I mean, don’t you think something’s wrong when you see this? Haven’t you ever thought

that something's not right after seeing this scene in the hallway? I don't want to be ordered to become a turtle by someone like you who's looked down at this sight from standing height every time there's been an air raid drill."

The sirens continued to ring.

Iriya didn't stand around for long. She pulled Asaba's hand and took off again. They flew down the stairs, ran through the hallway connecting to the gymnasium and burst out onto the school grounds with their indoor shoes still on. Asaba couldn't breathe anymore. He gave it his all to keep his legs moving so that he wouldn't fall down, and ran after Iriya.

They quickly made it to the front of the bomb shelter's bulkhead doors.

The bulkhead was big enough so that two large vehicles lined up side by side could easily enter and exit. A thick signboard for some kind of stamina drink or fertilizer was plastered on it.

Asaba finally stopped. Breathing feebly, he collapsed on the spot.

During air raid drills, they never actually went inside of the bomb shelter. They'd just line up in front of the bulkhead, perform a headcount, and that'd be the end. To begin with, people had said that Sonohara Base directly controlled the opening and closing of the bulkhead doors. Asaba had never seen the inside of the bomb shelter before.

However, Iriya stuck a grey card into the slit of the unopened door, and all too easily unsealed the lock. The bulkhead slowly began to open. The cross sections of the doors that slowly rose in front of them were much thicker than Asaba could have ever imagined.

Iriya grabbed Asaba's hand again.

Asaba followed after her, practically crawling on the ground.

The interior of the bomb shelter was about as wide as the gymnasium, and felt surprisingly clean. There were several hatches lined up along floor. Colorful lines were drawn like those in hospital hallways. Rotating lamps scattered all over the place cast yellow light everywhere. Somewhere, a speaker was broadcasting the same message over and over in a female voice.

“The root code has been utilized. Currently, all locks are unsealed. The root code has been utilized. Currently, all locks are unsealed.”

Suddenly, as if somebody had dropped a massive boulder, tremors shook the air and reverberated throughout Asaba’s core.

Asaba turned around in surprise. The bulkhead that was open just moments ago was now tightly shut. Iriya was operating a panel next to the bulkhead, and the female voice coming from the speaker said, “The root code has been altered. Encrypted lockdown of the bulkhead is now complete. Physically disconnecting external lines. Air circulation set to completely enclosed environment. The root code has been altered.”

Surprised, Asaba asked,

“D-Did you close it?”

Iriya didn’t respond. She pressed several more keys on the panel, and the hatches on the floor opened up one after another, like missile tubes on a submarine. Storage containers rose from below.

“U-Um—” Asaba finally spoke. “You do know that those sirens earlier were just a drill, right? A monthly air raid drill. You never had those in your previous school?”

Iriya appeared caught off guard for an instant, but immediately blew off that notion. She moved towards one of the storage containers, passed her grey card over the decoder, and opened the door.

“Hey, listen. You might not be aware since you just transferred schools, but today’s been set since way back to be a drill day. And also, if this was a normal drill—”

“If this was a normal drill, they would have played a broadcast announcing, ‘We will be performing a drill’ before ringing the sirens,” Asaba suddenly thought to himself.

“And yet, just earlier, the sirens went off without a broadcast,” he concluded silently.

A little hole opened up in the pit of Asaba’s stomach.

“Today’s a drill day. So what? What does that prove?” his other self began.

“This is ridiculous. I’m overthinking it. War would never break out anyway. Air Defense Committee Member Nakamura’s just being cute, setting the sirens off without a broadcast—” Asaba told himself.

“And what if right about now that very Nakamura is scared shitless and pissing himself in the broadcast room? He’d be the first one in the school to notice the gravity of the situation, right? I mean, he didn’t even press the button yet, and yet the level one warning went off through the direct line.”

“No way. No way in hell that’d happen. They decided a long time ago that today would be an air raid drill day. Everybody went into the hallways and became turtles, they lined up in front of the bomb shelter and took a head count —”

“You mean to tell me that the enemy said something like, ‘Oh, today’s Sonohara Middle School’s air raid drill day, and we don’t wanna confuse anyone, so we’ll just do it tomorrow?’ They’re worried about that? Cut the shit and look at reality. I’ll say it one more time: the sirens went off. And the broadcast that’s supposed to signify that it’s a drill *wasn’t there*. That’s reality.”

“No. This is just a special case. Nakamura-sensei was all excited, saying, ‘This time, the theme is going to be realism.’ That’s what Akiho said. So—”

“So what? Tell me.”

The little hole in the pit of Asaba’s stomach grew larger and larger.

Asaba’s everyday life oozed out of that hole and disappeared. All that was left behind was pitch-black nothingness.

“What’s with that face? You still don’t get it, do you? Nakamura said it, right? ‘This time, the theme is going to be realism.’ Should I teach you what reality is? It’s this. This is reality. This is the real airstrike that everyone’s been waiting for. Hey, what’s the matter? Did you think that if war really broke out you’d be able to hear the explosions from inside the shelter? Did you think that such an outdated shelter would be able to survive an airstrike in this day and age? Well, whatever. Like they say, ignorance is bliss. I won’t say anymore on that. Well then, from here on out it all depends on you. It really is the beginning of a show

with your neck on the line, you bastard. Every single one of you took it lightly, thinking that war would never break out. And yet, despite that you all sat there bored to death with ordinary everyday life, secretly hoping at the bottom of your hearts for this. This is real war.”

Asaba felt his shoulders get poked.

When he looked up, Iriya stood before him. “Hold this.”

The instant he saw what was being offered to him, his stomach twisted. It was completely human engineered, and bore a surprising shape. However, Asaba knew what it was after a single glance.

It was an automatic rifle.

“Just in case,” Iriya added.

Asaba’s body went numb. He couldn’t move a single finger.

“They might make it inside.” Iriya already had the same rifle slung over her shoulder. Using her eyes, she indicated the storage containers lying at her feet one after the other.

“Spare ammunition is in this one. BOTTOX¹ rounds are in the BS4² package. It might be ineffective, but don’t use it until I give the okay. Protective gear is over there—”

“This is a joke, right?” Asaba muttered hoarsely. “This is just a drill, right? Everyone’s safe and sound outside, laughing at us, right? War wouldn’t break out, right?”

Still holding the automatic rifle out in front of her, Iriya looked up at Asaba.

“The war started in 1947,” Iriya said. “It’s just that nobody noticed.”

“Maybe everyone’s turned into ash,” Asaba thought. “Maybe, on the other side of that bulkhead, the world I know no longer exists. Maybe the raging flames of the apocalypse have reduced the school and town into rubble. Maybe everyone I know and don’t know has been burnt to such a crisp that people can’t even tell what gender they were.”

Asaba weakly stretched out his arms, and with a shaking hand, took the automatic rifle and— The telephone rang.

TL Notes:

1. [BOTTOX](#): Botulinum Toxin is a protein and neurotoxin produced by the bacterium *Clostridium botulinum*. It is the most acutely toxic substance known, with an estimated human median lethal dose of 1.3–2.1 ng/kg intravenously or intramuscularly and 10–13 ng/kg when inhaled. Botulinum toxin can cause botulism, a serious and life-threatening illness in humans and animals.
2. BS4: Bio-safety level 4. Packaging designed to contain biological materials.

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Chapter 2: Love Letter

2-13

Asaba screamed. Iriya dropped the rifle that she was holding out. In a panic, Asaba looked around frantically, and noticed for the first time that there was a phone fixed to the inner right wall. A red lamp was flashing in sync with the telephone's ringing. Iriya simply stared at the blinking red lamp, with her eyes wide open. Left with no other choice, Asaba picked up the cordless telephone receiver.

"Hello...?"

Asaba expected to hear, "Surrender now," in crappy Japanese, but contrary to his expectations, the man on the other line spoke proper Japanese. Moreover, the other person immediately guessed his name just upon hearing Asaba's voice.

"Oh! Asaba!? It's me, it's me. Enomoto."

"Enomoto?" Asaba thought.

It was an unfamiliar name; but it was a familiar voice.

The other end of the line seemed to be at a boisterous location. Asaba could hear a commotion in the background, like the kind a huge crowd makes when they complete a difficult task. Someone yelled out in the background, "Nami-saaan, we got through, we got through! Maann, great job guys. Got it, got it, I'll take you out, treat you to whatever you want."

"Heey. Hello, Asaba? Can you hear me? We forcibly connected to your line using our emergency lines. Say something."

Without thinking,

"Uh, um, who are you trying to reach?"

"Huh?? Hey, what's with that? Remember? We met at the pool two nights ago, right? Did I not introduce myself back then?"

“No, you didn’t,” Asaba thought.

He immediately remembered. That mysterious man that suddenly appeared by the pool at night, who introduced himself as “something of an older brother,” and told that story about that angry old janitor. He had droopy eyes, and had a face that looked like he was the type to tell dirty jokes and laugh out loud at them by alone. That face began to grin in his mind.

“Maaan, we were completely stumped. We were so surprised when the system over where you guys are suddenly had its root code altered. Then Shiina contacted us. Iriya mistook the drill siren for a real Level One warning and forcibly dragged you along, right? You okay? You still a virgin?”

Asaba felt his body go limp. He was so relieved that his vision started to dim.

“It was a drill, after all. There’s no way that war would break out,” he thought. “Akiho, Nishikubo, Hanamura, the President... everyone’s safe.”

“Sorry for all the trouble. I mean, Iriya’s lived in the base ever since she was little, and trained professionals would never set off something dangerous like a Level One warning in the first place, even for drills. Can’t really blame her for being completely shocked at that.”

“Oh.” Asaba’s mouth wasn’t functioning very well. “It’s really, really a drill, right?”

“Yup. The world is completely at peace. Everyone over here is alive and kicking.”

“‘Over here?’ Where are you?”

“At the Sonohara Command Post. Hey, we did everything we could on our end, but Iriya went and locked down the bulkhead, so you’re gonna have to hang tight there for a little while. Sorry about that. But you don’t really mind, right? You got food, booze, and smokes. Put Iriya on.”

Asaba turned around. Iriya was standing directly behind him.

“It was a drill after all,” Asaba said.

Iriya silently took the telephone receiver. Her conversation, which consisted of her quietly repeating, “yes, understood,” over and over, lasted about three

minutes. From where Asaba was standing, it seemed more like she was just one-sidedly receiving instructions. She quietly returned the receiver to the phone.

Then, Iriya crumpled to the floor.

Asaba thought that she was so relieved that she wasn't able to remain standing.

"Thank God it wasn't really war though, right? I thought it was all over earlier —" Asaba began.

Iriya was crouched down on the floor. Her shoulders were trembling.

Iriya was crying.

Asaba was instantaneously taken aback. He had no idea why Iriya was crying, nor did he have any idea what he should say. All he could do was pace back and forth restlessly.

"U-um, Iriya, hey, are you okay?"

Iriya's voice was barely audible. She was quietly crying. Her tears dripped down onto her skirt. For every tear that fell, Asaba panicked and wanted to do something, but he had no idea what he should do. He thought that patting her on the back once or twice would help comfort her, and reached out his hand. However, right then, he saw the automatic rifle slung over Iriya's shoulder.

Iriya spoke quietly. "If only it was a real airstrike," she said. "If only everyone died. If only we lost."

Asaba opened his mouth several times, but in the end, he was unable to utter a single word. Time slowly ticked by.

Asaba wasn't aware of her circumstances. "Even if I ask her, she probably won't answer me," he thought.

He simply stood there. He was facing a girl who couldn't stop crying, who was muttering, "if only everyone died," with the sling of an automatic rifle digging into the shoulder of her middle school uniform. He had no idea what was going on, and felt like he shouldn't lightly say things like, "it'll be okay," or "cheer up."

Asaba stood stone-footed. He had no idea what to do. Iriya was hugging her knees. Time was slowly ticking by.

